

Higher education quality assurance and social transformation: the national governance of quality

Saleem Badat

INTRODUCTION

Text needed here – QA as neo-liberalism/new public management etc; QA as transformative, etc. Own approach re SA context

In this paper I wish to pursue the question of the quality of the national governance of quality, in a context of higher education and social transformation.

Accordingly, in the first section I deal with the governance of quality in a context of higher education and social transformation. Thereafter, in section two I address the issue of the quality of the governance of quality, as it has unfolded under the auspices of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) of the Council on Higher Education.

The Governance of Quality

With respect to the *governance of quality*, there are two issues that I wish to address. First, is a working definition of governance appropriate for the domain of higher education quality assurance. Second, I want to advance a number of propositions, which I am of the view must necessarily inform South African higher education quality assurance.

Drawing on a recent report on governance in higher education, I take governance to include

all activities that can be seen as purposeful efforts to guide, steer, control or manage (quality in) higher education institutions and the sector as a whole. Consequently, (this) includes the structures, processes and (principles and) values by which institutions take decisions in pursuing their objectives.

Following from this, good governance ensures that policies and systems are in place in order to manage and administer institutions in an effective and efficient manner to achieve their, as well as the system's, objectives (CHE, 2002:10)

This definition has a number of merits.

- First, it emphasises the structural, human agency and empirical dimensions of the governance of quality
- Second, it raises the question of system and institutional objectives
- Third, it suggests the elements of policy and decision-making as aspects of the governance of quality
- Fourth, it highlights that principles, values and criteria inform policy and decision-making and system-building
- Finally, it hints at the question of the organisational arrangements for regulating higher education quality

This working definition of governance opens up important avenues of analysis with respect to quality, which I will explore more fully in the second section of this paper. For the moment, I want to address one aspect of the working definition, namely the issue of the principles, values, and criteria in relation to policy making and system-building, through explicating the fundamental propositions that in my view should inform the governance of higher education quality.

Proposition 1: The importance of national context

Notwithstanding its numerous merits, what the definition of governance does not bring into play is the fundamentally important issue of historical context – of social and higher education structure and conjuncture. Yet in considering the governance of quality or any other issue, context is, of course, crucially important.

Context, the late Philip Abrams wrote

is not a matter of noting the way in which the past provides a background to the present; it is a matter of treating what people do in the present as a struggle to create a future *out* of the past, of seeing that the past is not just the womb of the present but the only raw material out of which the present can be constructed (Abrams, 1982:8).

The nature of the inherited and contemporary South African context is a complex issue. I can only allude to certain aspects that are especially relevant to our concerns.

1. To begin with conditions and change outside of higher education, there is, of course, much debate and contestation on the pace and nature of change since 1994.

On the one hand, some social actors are disappointed with the nature and pace of change over the past ten years and argue that government thinking in South Africa is characterised by a conservative ‘neo-liberalism’ and that government and various other institutional policies are ‘neo-liberal’. On the other hand, there are views that government political and economic thinking continues to be essentially characterised by unwavering adherence to the radical goals of the Freedom Charter and the 1994 reconstruction and development programme.

In reality, there is neither an entirely neo-liberal inspired reform process and pervasive and hegemonic neo-liberalism, nor a wholly revolutionary sweeping displacement of old social structures and arrangements and dawn of an entirely new social order. Instead, there is a mixed picture and fluid situation characterised by contesting social forces with competing goals, strategies and policy agendas, by attempts to resolve profound economic and social paradoxes in differing ways, by continuities and breaks and contradictions and ambiguities in policy and practice, and by differing trajectories and trends. The post-apartheid South African social order is not yet indelibly defined and continues to be uncertain.

The debate on the nature and trajectory of change in the political economy raises the issue of whether quality assurance, wittingly or unwittingly, is or will become a tool of Neo-Liberalism and the handmaiden of ‘managerialism’ and limited

social change, or is or will be an instrument of both higher education and wider social transformation. Of course, the nature and pace of change in the political economy also has major implications for the higher education transformation agenda, including the role of quality assurance in the pursuit of this agenda.

2. With respect to higher education itself, we inherited a higher education ‘system’ profoundly shaped by social, political and economic inequalities of a class, race, gender, institutional and spatial nature that were generated during the apartheid period.

- The inherited higher education system was designed, in the main, to reproduce, through teaching and research, white and male privilege and black and female subordination in all spheres of society. All higher institutions were, in differing ways and to differing extents, deeply implicated in this.

The serious contemporary under-representation of black and women students in particular academic disciplines and fields and at postgraduate level and the domination of the academic labour force and knowledge production and of high level occupations and professions by white and male South Africans are sharp testimony to this past.

- Research and teaching in higher education were extensively shaped by the ideology, and socio-economic and political priorities of the apartheid separate development programme.
- The higher education ‘system’ was fragmented and institutions were differentiated along the lines of race and ethnicity. This was accompanied by the advantage of ‘historically white institutions’ and the disadvantage of ‘historically black institutions’, in terms of the social and academic roles that were allocated to each and the concomitant financial resources that were made available to each. This disadvantage, however, is not just historical. It is also related to the current capacities of the historically black institutions to pursue excellence and provide quality experiences and outcomes, and to contribute to economic and social reconstruction and development.

3. A pertinent dimension of our context is the increasing trans-nationalisation of higher education and indeed also its marketisation and commodification. Business seeking new sources of profit sees higher education as a multi-billion dollar industry. This is well-illustrated by the World Trade Organisation’s (WTO) definition, with the push of particular developed countries, of higher education as a service like any other service such as the sale and purchase of insurance policies or McDonald burgers, and the incorporation of higher education into the General Agreement on Trade and Services (GATS). Today, much larger and expanding areas of knowledge, research and institutional provision are falling under the sway of the profit imperative of business.
4. South Africa’s new democratic government has since 1994 committed itself to both transforming higher education, and to the social goal of transcending the inherited apartheid social structure with its deep economic and social

inequalities, and institutionalising a new social order based on equity, justice and democracy.

- Higher education must become more socially equitable internally and promote social equity more generally by providing opportunity for social advancement through equity of access and opportunity.
 - It is now called on to address and become responsive to the development needs of a democratic South Africa. These needs are crystallised in the *Reconstruction and Development Programme* of 1994 as a fourfold commitment. First is 'meeting basic needs of people. Second is 'developing our human resources'. Third is 'building the economy', and finally is the task of 'democratising the state and society'.
 - It is also challenged to produce, through research and teaching and learning programmes, the knowledge and personpower that will enable South Africa to engage proactively, critically and creatively with globalisation and participate in a highly competitive global economy.
5. Not surprisingly, the past ten years have seen an extensive range of activities and a wide array of transformation oriented initiatives - a radical re-definition of higher education values, goals and policies and the elaboration of a comprehensive transformation agenda. Numerous initiatives – legislative change, new regulatory frameworks, policy formation, adoption, implementation and review - have been undertaken in a large number of domains. New institutional structures have been created to steer higher education and new forms and modes of provision have emerged. Higher education continues to be in flux and test the capabilities and capacities of national bodies and individual institutions and actors.

It is far too early to make definitive pronouncement on the success or otherwise of the transformation agenda.

Proposition 2: Higher education institutional context

Apart from understanding of the national social and higher education context, the governance of quality must also be deeply aware of and sensitive to the institutional contexts of change in higher education.

One dimension of institutional context is that we have institutions of different kinds, types, orientations and historical development paths, institutions of differing strengths and weaknesses, and absorptive capacities and capabilities, and different institutional cultures, including modes and forms of governance.

A second dimension of institutional context is the 'demand overload' on higher education institutions arising from flux. By this I mean both the necessity to cope with a vast array of national imperatives and initiatives, and the expectation on institutions to extend the range of opportunities, services, and products provided and their socio-

economic responsiveness and impact, without any significant increase in public and other revenues.

Proposition 3: The defined social purposes of higher education

While context is clearly a crucially important issue, it is, of course, not the only issue in the governance of quality. The defined social purposes and goals of higher education are also vitally important.

My third and fourth propositions therefore are that the governance of higher education quality must necessarily take as their points of departure the social purposes and the goals that have been defined for higher education, (even though there may be contestation around the purposes and goals themselves and/or strategies for the pursuit of these purposes and/or goals).

In South Africa, the higher education transformation agenda acknowledges that higher education confers certain private benefits, but nonetheless conceives of it, quite correctly, as principally a *public good*.

Furthermore, it posits various (and indeed divers) *social purposes* that higher education must serve:

- Attention to the pressing local, regional and national needs of the South African society and to the problems and challenges of the broader African context
- The mobilisation of human talent and potential through lifelong learning to contribute to the social, economic, cultural and intellectual life of a rapidly changing society
- Laying the foundations of a critical civil society, with a culture of public debate and tolerance which accommodates differences and competing interests
- The training and provision of personpower to strengthen this country's enterprises, services and infrastructure. This requires the development of professionals and knowledge workers with globally equivalent skills, but who are socially responsible and conscious of their role in contributing to the national development effort and social transformation
- The production, acquisition and application of new knowledge: ...a well-organised, vibrant research and development system which integrates the research and training capacity of higher education with the needs of industry and of social reconstruction (DoE, 1997)

Proposition 4: The goals of higher education

The governance of quality must take as its point of departure the overall goal of creating a new higher education (HE) landscape that is characterised by equitable, high quality and sustainable HE institutions that are well governed and responsive to the personpower and knowledge needs of economic growth and social development and the consolidation of democracy.

The specific goals include:

- Increased and broadened participation within higher education to meet personpower needs and advance social equity – crucial given the history of disadvantage of black and women South Africans, especially of working class and rural poor origins and the disabled
- The establishment of a national, integrated, co-ordinated and differentiated higher education system – there is no virtue in a homogenous higher education system
- Improved national steering and institutional planning and management, including the development of three-year institutional plans
- Promotion of quality and quality assurance through the accreditation of programmes, programme evaluations and institutional audits by the HEQC of the CHE
- Good governance and effective management and administration of higher education through co-operative governance of the system and institutions, partnerships and capacity building initiatives
- A new academic policy framework for the offering of qualifications, programmes, including their incorporation within a National Qualifications Framework designed to promote articulation, mobility and transferability
- Curriculum restructuring and knowledge production which is responsive to societal interests and needs.

In essence, the governance of quality should have as its core goals higher education institutions becoming powerhouses that produce knowledgeable, competent, skilled and socially committed graduates and produce and disseminate knowledge.

Proposition 5: Adherence to principles and values

The fifth proposition with respect to the governance of quality is that it should advance the fundamental values and principles of the 1997 *White Paper* on higher education. These include excellence and quality itself, equity and redress, democratisation, development and effectiveness and efficiency.

Proposition 6: Academic freedom and institutional autonomy

The sixth proposition is that governance of quality should, in particular, safeguard the additional *White Paper* principles of academic freedom and institutional autonomy, as well as the requirement of public accountability. I deliberately advance this as a separate proposition to emphasise the seriousness that I accord academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

Proposition 7: Equity and quality

Similarly, I wish to emphasise the proposition that the governance of quality must pursue *both* quality and equity, because they are equally desirable values and goals and there are unfortunate consequences if one or the other is sacrificed or privileged.

Proposition 8: Accountability and improvement

The governance of quality must sensitively balance the requirement for accountability on the part of higher education institutions for the assurance of the quality of learning and teaching, research and community service and the promotion, improvement and development of quality in these areas.

Proposition 9: Instruments of HE transformation

Proposition 9 is that the governance of quality must recognise the specific instruments and mechanisms that have been defined for effecting the transformation of South African higher education.

These instruments include *planning* (three year institutional rolling plans, institutional restructuring through combination of institutions, the programme and qualification mix exercise), *funding* (a new goal directed funding formula), and of course, *quality assurance* itself.

In governing quality, the quality assurance instrument must take cognizance of the unfolding use of the national instruments of planning and funding, should incorporate into these other instruments quality assurance concerns and dimensions, and should interact with these instruments where necessary to ensure the coherence of policies and implementation, and that institutions are not over-burdened by being subject to myriad policy demands.

Proposition 10: The mode of regulation of quality

The governance of quality must be oriented and build towards the maximum self-regulation of quality by higher education institutions themselves, with national external agencies playing the roles of consultative agenda-, framework- and policy-development and implementation and the external validation of the systems of quality assurance of higher education institutions.

Proposition 11: The assurance of quality cannot be left to the 'market'

In defining a role for national external agencies, the proposition that logically follows is that the assurance of quality cannot be left to the 'market' – whether in the forms of the 'invisible hand' or the self-appointed arbiters of quality with their either mysterious and/or dubious instruments for making judgements on quality.

At the CHE colloquium on building relationships between higher education and the private and public Sectors in 2002, then Trade and Industry Minister Erwin was forthright:

Knowledge is not a commodity and can never be one. Knowledge is the distillation of human endeavour and it is the most profound collective good that there is.

Minister Erwin went on to argue that the more knowledge was turned into a commodity and privatised ‘the more it will either corrode the collective knowledge base or itself corrode as it distances itself from that collective wellspring’.

Proposition 12: Partnership

The governance and regulation of quality must be a principled and clearly and explicitly defined partnership between national agencies and government and other stakeholders, and especially institutions, academics and students.

Proposition 13: The Outcomes of Quality Assurance

As outcomes, the governance of quality must yield substantial and continuous improvements in learning and teaching, research and community service, without undue and onerous burdens being placed on institutions and academics.

Proposition 14: Effective monitoring and evaluation

There should be vigilant monitoring and effective evaluation of the impact and outcomes of quality assurance in the domains of learning and teaching, research and community service and on institutional planning and financing. In addition, there should also be monitoring and evaluation of the quality of governance of the national quality assurance agencies and their effectiveness and efficiency.

Proposition 15: A sustainable quality assurance system

Finally, great care must be taken to ensure that both the design and implementation of the quality assurance system take into account the available human and financial resources and also develop the required specialist expertise so as to ensure a sustainable quality assurance system. The past decade of policy formation and implementation shows that it is short-sighted to pursue policy goals without strong attention to the requisite human and financial resources for their achievement.

The Quality of the Governance of Quality

Having provided a definition of governance, and having advanced the key propositions that should inform the governance of quality, I wish to now argue that the quality of the governance of quality that we experience at present is of an exceptionally high nature (and that are good grounds to be confident that it will continue to be the case into the future). This high quality governance of quality is a consequence of three related factors:

- First, quality assurance system building and implementation evinces a strong congruence with the key propositions that I have stated should inform the governance of quality in South Africa

- Second, the past years have been characterised, despite challenging conditions, by thoughtful, creative, imaginative and innovative, and highly consultative system building (frameworks, policies, criteria, standards, protocols, manuals, resources, capacity development, research, and communication and interaction with stakeholders) and implementation in particular areas
- The forging of a democratic consensus for which credit is due to the collaborative efforts between the HEQC, national representative higher education organisations and institutions.

In developing the argument I will begin with the approach to quality that has been developed in the past few years. I will then proceed to address how quality assurance activities have been undertaken, including the scope and focus of the HEQC's activities.

The Approach to Quality

The HEQC has framed its work in relation to the goal of developing in South Africa a transformed, equitable, socially and economically responsive, well-governed and high quality higher education system. It seeks to contribute to universities becoming powerhouses for the production of high quality, skilled, competent and socially committed graduates, and of knowledge that contributes to critical intellectual and political debate, economic and social transformation in South Africa, and the revitalisation of the African continent.

The ability of South African universities to become intellectual and knowledge powerhouses depends crucially on high quality learning and teaching and research programmes. Quality, in terms of institutions meeting minimum standards of learning and teaching provision, minimum criteria with respect to programmes and qualifications offered, and a constant drive to improve and enhance quality beyond the minimum requirements, is therefore vital if universities are to make a meaningful and pivotal contribution to social equity, development and the consolidation and deepening of democracy.

In its *Founding Document*, which was the product of extensive consultation, the HEQC undertakes to develop a quality assurance framework based on

Fitness for purpose in relation to specified mission within a national framework that encompasses differentiation and diversity

Value for money in relation to the full range of higher education purposes set out in the White Paper.

Transformation in the sense of developing the capabilities of individual learners for personal enrichment, as well as the requirements of social development and economic and employment growth (CHE, 2001:15)

It also indicates that the above criteria 'will be located within a *fitness of purpose* framework based on national goals, priorities and targets' (ibid).

Finally, the HEQC recognises that the 'complex and socially embedded nature of quality claims', and therefore commits itself to ensuring that 'external judgements

about the achievement of quality in respect of the above will be based on a rigorous but non-reductive approach which takes into account different degrees of emphasis on the above elements as well as different approaches to their achievement' (ibid.). As a consequence, both at the levels of philosophy and practice, the HEQC's approach to quality embody a number of key features.

1. A deep *sensitivity* to history, institutional, national and international contexts and the social transformation agenda. There is *no* adherence to any simplistic, timeless, a-historical, universalistic and invariant notion of quality.
2. An understanding that quality must be judged not solely in terms of labour market responsiveness or cost recovery, but in relation to the range of diverse social purposes that higher education institutions must necessarily serve.

That is to say, it is vital that in a country like South Africa, where higher education transformation is part of a larger process of democratic reconstruction and development, that social responsiveness is not entirely subsumed to economic responsiveness. The consequences of such a one-dimensional approach to higher education responsiveness could be greatly impoverishing for the broader social role of higher education. The responsiveness of higher education to the general and specific needs of the economy can only be a subset of a more complex and multi-faceted notion of responsiveness.

3. A recognition that a differentiated system in which institutions have different objectives and address different social and educational purposes will necessarily have, beyond an agreed minimum, a variety of standards, as appropriate to specified objectives and purposes.
4. An awareness that the quality assurance system must sensitively balance at least five important potential paradoxes.
 - '*Fitness for purpose*' in relation to specified mission and '*fitness of purpose*' with respect to national goals, priorities and targets.

During consultations around the HEQC's audit framework document a few institutions and actors raised the concern that the 'fitness of purpose' dimension of the HEQC's approach was an infringement of institutional autonomy and academic freedom. Since institutional autonomy and academic freedom are vital principles for the effective functioning of higher education and must be vigorously guarded (not just in relation to the state and other external actors, but also institutional managers), this concern needs some discussion.

If the infringement claim is grounded in conceptions that institutions and academics enjoy or should enjoy *absolute* institutional autonomy and academic freedom respectively, then, certainly, any external requirements will be deemed to be violations of institutional autonomy and academic freedom. I don't wish to enter into argument here about such a conception of institutional autonomy and academic freedom, except to say that I don't think it can be sustained.

If on the other hand, the infringement claim is grounded in non-absolutist conceptions of institutional autonomy and academic freedom, then, debate and

some consensus is vital regarding the meanings of and relationships between, institutional autonomy and academic freedom, as well as public accountability, in South Africa in 2004 and beyond.

With respect to 'fitness of purpose', the HEQC point of departure is the institutional mission, which is defined by the institution and not the HEQC. It would be highly surprising if this mission were not to some extent formulated in relation to and conditioned by national social goals and the defined social purposes and goals of higher education. Be that as it may, it is difficult to conceive how quality assurance can be approached without any reference to national social goals and the defined social purposes and goals of higher education.

A university with all-white academic staff and student bodies and teaching and research programmes oriented towards continental and local European issues and concerns can be considered high quality elsewhere, but it is doubtful that this can be so in South Africa, unless one subscribes to a notion of quality that is utterly a-historical and invariant in relation to social and national purposes and goals.

- The need for *public accountability* with *facilitating the development and improvement of quality* and pursuit of rising benchmarks

In South Africa, quality is fundamentally about ensuring that universities become powerhouses of knowledge production and dissemination that help to overcome our inherited inequities, contributes to reconstruction and development, positions us to engage effectively with globalisation and also nurtures critical citizenship. To view the imperative of quality in South African higher education purely or even largely in terms of public accountability is to sorely miss the point.

It does not appear to be the HEQC's intention to institutionalise a quality assurance system that is of dubious value to the core activities of higher education: learning, teaching, research and community service. Indeed it seems well-understood that the emerging system must add real and yield substantial and continuous quality improvements without unduly placing onerous burdens on institutions and academics.

In my view this is best secured through developing a culture of self-regulation on the part of institutions and academics and students, which puts the principal responsibility for the quality of provision onto institutions and key institutional actors themselves, with external validation by the HEQC utilising academic peers.

- *Adherence to agreed criteria* for programme accreditation and *standards* for institutional quality management systems with *scope for imaginative programme and institutional innovation*

There is little evidence that the HEQC's intends to generate a quality culture of dull, plodding conformity that stifles imagination, creativity and innovation in higher education. There seems to be ample recognition that there must be

space for academic and research programmes with different purposes, methodologies, pedagogies and modes of delivery, and that respond in distinct ways to South Africa's varied and changing intellectual, social, and economic needs.

- *The maintenance and enhancement of quality with the advancement of social equity.*

In some quarters, it is contended that the imperatives of increased participation in higher education, equity and redress must necessarily result in the reduction of the quality of provision, qualifications and graduates. While there is such a risk, such an outcome is not pre-ordained. There is no inevitable conflict between quality and equity.

Quality and equity are not separate parallel vectors. They are two sides of the same coin. The pursuit of *equity without quality* would represent sham equity and a betrayal of students, the public and society at large. It would also mean no substantive and meaningful erosion of the domination of high-level occupations and knowledge production by particular social groups. Further, while private benefits may accrue to graduates, there could be little public benefits for society. Conversely, if quality is privileged over *equity*, then South African universities will continue to reproduce the social structure of the apartheid past and compromise the social transformation agenda of advancement for historically disadvantaged and marginalized social groups.

- *Leadership and a catalytic role on the part of the HEQC with meaningful and multiple kinds of participation by a range of organisations and actors.*

The building of high quality programmes and institutions must of necessity be a strong and principled partnership between the CHE, Higher Education South Africa, institutions, academics and students, professional bodies, business and the government.

Such a principled partnership, however, must be underpinned by a common commitment to high quality in curiosity driven knowledge production and also that which grapples with the concrete problems of the reconstruction and development of our society; in teaching and learning interactions so that graduates are equipped with the knowledge, skills, competencies and attitudes to contribute to economic and social development and democratisation; and in community engagement.

Undertaking of quality assurance activities

As far as the undertaking of quality assurance activities is concerned, the *Higher Education Act*, No. 101 of 1997 requires the CHE to establish the HEQC to 'promote quality assurance in higher education', 'audit the quality assurance mechanisms of higher education institutions' and 'accredit programmes of higher education'. The Act also stipulates that the CHE must comply with the policies and criteria formulated by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), in terms of *Act 58 of 1995*.

The CHE began its operations in 1999. The CHE established a Quality Assurance Task Team, and thereafter an interim HEQC constituted by members of the CHE and nominees of various stakeholder bodies, the first meeting of which was held in June 1999. Following 23 months of start-up activities, including the production of a *Founding Document*, the HEQC was eventually launched publicly in May 2001.

To begin with HEQC laid the foundations for a national quality assurance system comprising programme accreditation and re-accreditation, institutional audits and the promotion of quality and capacity development. On the one hand, the HEQC engaged in systems development activities in relation to programme accreditation, re-accreditation and co-ordination, institutional audits and quality promotion and capacity development (development of frameworks, policies, criteria, standards, protocols, procedures, manuals and resources, establishment of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, instruments for internal quality assurance and promotion, capacity building of individuals and institutions) and in the careful planning of implementation. This work was informed by extensive research and development, which drew on both local and international expertise, knowledge and experiences, and by communication and consultations with key stakeholders.

On the other hand, and simultaneously, the HEQC has undertaken the accreditation of the new programmes of public and private providers, the re-accreditation of academic programmes (scores of programmes of private providers and all Master of Business Administration programmes offered in South Africa), pilot audits of two public institutions and one private institution, and a wide range of quality promotion and capacity development activities.

Finally, alongside quality assurance systems development and the undertaking of quality assurance activities, personnel and financial resources were mobilized and an institutional infrastructure was established that included offices and governance, management, administrative, personnel, financial, communication and information management systems.

Turning to the scope and focus of the HEQC's quality assurance activities, these were prescribed to the HEQC by the *Higher Education Act*. However, the HEQC did not simply take the scope and focus of its work as a given, but gave serious consideration to them in relation to context, the goals of higher education transformation, and available specialist expertise, personpower and financial resources.

In the first place, and notwithstanding appeals of some constituencies to incorporate within its quality assurance considerations the quality of institutional governance, including especially financial governance, the HEQC deliberately chose to confine the scope of its work to the core activities of higher education: learning and teaching, research and knowledge-related community service. The HEQC regarded the issue of the quality of institutional governance to be the responsibility of the council of an institution and the Ministry. The HEQC indicated that it would, as part of its audit of institutions, examine reports on institutional governance, but would only raise questions related to institutional governance in so far as there was clear evidence of a detrimental impact on learning and teaching, research and knowledge-related community service.

Second, from amongst the variety of areas and issues related to learning and teaching, research and knowledge-related community service that could be the focus of quality assurance activities – departmental and /or faculty teaching and/or research reviews, investigations of disciplines and fields, and so forth - the HEQC consciously and deliberately chose to focus on four particular areas and issues.

1. To protect students, employers and the general public, and safeguard the quality of programmes, the HEQC instituted the requirement that all *new* programmes – defined as one which has not existed before or is a programme that has been significantly changed, i.e. when its purpose, outcomes, field of study, mode or site of delivery has been changed to a considerable extent - of institutions had to be *accredited* by the HEQC.
2. It was impossible for the HEQC to undertake the accreditation/re-accreditation of the thousands of programmes offered by institutions prior to its origin. The HEQC was obliged to regard all such programmes offered as accredited. However, the HEQC innovated the national review and re-accreditation, of the kind undertaken with regard to the Master of Business Administration (MBA) programme, as a creative strategy for protecting and enhancing quality.
3. As from late 2004, all institutions were to be *audited* on a six-year cycle to ensure that they had quality assurance mechanisms in place to safeguard and enhance the quality of academic, research and community service programmes and of learning, teaching and research. Auditors trained by the HEQC and with expertise on higher education matters would conduct the audits, which would be evidence based. Their results would be made public in some form.
4. The concern of the HEQC was not only the maintenance of quality but also promoting continuous improvement in the quality of academic programmes, research and institutional provision. This required giving serious attention to and investment in a range of quality promotion and capacity development activities. Quite deliberately, the HEQC budget was overwhelmingly devoted to quality promotion and capacity development activities, undertaken by a Quality Promotion and Capacity Development Directorate.

At the level of institutions, this involved support to develop strong internal quality management systems that encompass programme design, assessment, delivery, monitoring and review, and specific assistance to merging institutions and historically disadvantaged institutions.

At the level of key actors, it involved enhancing the knowledge and expertise of quality assurance personnel, ranging from quality assurance managers of institutions, to the identification and training of auditors including chairpersons of audit panels, and the identification and training of programme evaluators. It also entailed support to academics and academic support personnel through such initiatives such as the Teaching and Learning Project, which sought to develop resources for enhancing various dimensions of learning and teaching.

Attention was also turned towards extending the quality literacy campaigns to enhance student and public understanding of quality issues and to facilitate students themselves initiating improvements in learning and teaching.

Concomitantly, careful attention was being given to how the HEQC could draw on and work with the various actors that had indicated a keenness to support its quality promotion activities – from the heads of libraries to academic development specialists to distance education organisations and student organisations.

At the level of the HEQC itself, it entailed extending the knowledge and expertise of personnel through a range of activities that included placement of personnel at quality assurance agencies in India, the United Kingdom, Australia and elsewhere.

In relation to the Department of Education it involved ongoing interaction to ensure that planning and funding decisions were as far as possible congruent with and facilitated the assurance and promotion of quality.

5. Finally, an important additional activity flowing from the accreditation responsibility of the HEQC was quality assurance co-ordination. This was necessitated by the South African system of multiple Education and Training Quality Assurers (ETQAs) and professional bodies, with actual or perceived claims related to the quality assurance of higher education programmes.

Conclusion

Text needed here

However, a number of quality assurance and development challenges face the HEQC and higher education institutions in coming years.

1. The success of quality assurance and development in South African higher education will ultimately depend on the maintenance and ongoing renewal of the present consensus on the importance of quality and the key mechanisms of quality assurance and development. Such a consensus, however, should not mean there should not continue to be vigorous debate on quality assurance goals, policies, strategies, instruments, and the pace and timeframes for achieving the goals.
2. The pursuit simultaneously of quality and social equity and redress in higher education raises difficult political and social dilemmas and choices and decisions, and necessitates trade-offs between principles, goals and strategies. The success of the quality agenda at all institutions will require bold leadership and careful management of such paradoxes.
3. The enhancement of quality will require creating imaginative and innovative national- and institutional-level pulleys and levers – strategies, instruments and mechanisms - for securing the participation and support of key higher education constituencies.
4. Equity of opportunity and outcomes within higher education, in contrast with equity of access, crucially depend on high quality provision, learning and teaching, curriculum innovation, and appropriate academic mentoring and development initiatives. These in turn depend on skilled personpower and adequate financial resources. Both these are major challenges in a context of demand overload on institutions and could entail difficult choices and decisions trade-offs in relation to access and equity and quality

5. More generally, there is a lack of knowledgeable and skilled personpower at system and institutional levels. Developing, therefore, the institutional and individual capabilities and capacities with respect to the range of quality assurance and improvement tasks and activities is an urgent and major priority. This will necessarily shape the nature, pace and outcomes of quality development.
6. Developing and sustaining a robust culture of self-regulation on the part of institutions and academics and students is the key to the success of quality assurance and development in South African higher education. A necessary condition of such a culture is quality becoming institutionalised within institutional planning and financing discussions and decision-making.
7. Both in relation to the HEQC's definition of quality, and higher education's social purposes and goals, the challenge that emanates from those who, in the name of higher education 'responsiveness' to the economy, seek to orient higher education qualifications and programmes towards a narrow skilling and excessive vocationalism should not be underestimated.

It is not in dispute that the contribution of higher education to the needs of the economy must be built. However, as the HEQC Executive Director, Mala Singh, notes, today 'the traditional knowledge responsibilities of universities are increasingly being located within the demands of economic productivity' (Singh, 2001), and rightly cautions that great care must be taken that institutions and academics do not allow the demand for 'responsiveness' to be 'thinned' down to purely market and economic responsiveness (ibid), in which 'the notion of responsiveness (could become) emptied of most of its content except for that which advances individual, organisational or national economic competitiveness' (ibid.)

8. Finally, as much as the HEQC has had positive effects on quality, there is a need to independently and critically monitor and evaluate the efficacy of its quality assurance and promotion policies, processes, strategies, instruments and mechanisms, and especially the unfolding implementation in coming years.

References

Abrams, P. (1982) *Historical Sociology*. New York: Cornell University Press

Council on Higher Education (2002) *Research Report: Governance in South African Higher Education*. Pretoria, CHE

Council on Higher Education (2001) *Higher Education Quality Committee Founding Document*. Pretoria, CHE

Singh, M (2001) Reinserting the public good in higher education transformation'. *Kagisano*, CHE Higher Education Discussion Series, No. 1, November