



***COUNCIL ON HIGHER EDUCATION  
Higher Education Quality Committee***

***Improving Quality in Higher Education : Whose  
Responsibility?***

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As the costs of higher education escalate and the struggle intensifies to gain access to higher education and succeed in acquiring a qualification that opens up employment opportunities, the issue of the quality of higher education is becoming more urgent. Institutions of higher education are competing with each other for students, and advertising is growing more aggressive and expansive in claims about programmes and qualifications on offer at different institutions. What sources of information exist to enable students, parents, employers and other stakeholders to distinguish between marketing claims and reasonably good quality education? How can one tell if a qualification or programme is of an acceptable standard and is at the level which is claimed for it? Choices and decisions about where to study and what to study have become even more difficult as the Department of Education's (DOE) restructuring and mergers produces a number of new public higher education institutions, and new private providers enter the market. The work of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) of the Council on Higher Education (CHE) will hopefully begin to provide one major source of information to be able to make better judgements on the quality of provision in higher education, both in the public and private provider sectors.

As is well known by now, the HEQC recently evaluated all 37 MBA programmes offered in South Africa by 27 public and private providers of higher education. This review, and especially the withdrawal of accreditation for nine MBA programmes, has put the spotlight firmly on quality issues in higher education. The review and its outcomes have made institutions much more aware of what is at stake in offering a qualification and in making public claims about the value of qualifications and their own reputations and capacity to offer them. The review has also made it clear to students that they should be asking much tougher questions when they sign up for a qualification.

There are many programmes and qualification areas which could benefit from an MBA type review, especially where there has been programme proliferation and rapid student growth or because of the importance of certain programmes to social and economic development or due to major shifts in modes of provision or for other pertinent reasons. However, the HEQC does not have the capacity or resources to conduct intensive reviews in a large number of areas of existing programmes, followed by analytical overviews of provision in these programme areas, as it has done in the case of the MBA. But what it is doing is rolling out a comprehensive quality assurance and quality development programme which is intended to have a more systematic and long-term impact on the quality of higher education provision. The MBA type review is only one aspect of this programme, and its objectives and impact must be seen in conjunction with all other initiatives of the HEQC.

What is the HEQC and how will it make quality issues in higher education more transparent? The HEQC is the permanent committee of the Council on Higher Education with statutory responsibility for institutional audits, programme accreditation and quality promotion. To these functions, the HEQC has added capacity development to support institutions and individuals with information and training in quality related issues. The Board of the HEQC consists of twelve members appointed by the CHE from stakeholder nominations. The Board uses the recommendations of peer review panels to make final decisions on audit and accreditation, independently of any other national authority.

The programme of the HEQC includes some of the following:

### **Institutional audits**

All public and private providers of higher education will have an audit at least once in a six-year cycle beginning in 2004. The audit will consist of a self-evaluation report prepared by institutions followed by a site visit by a panel of senior academics and administrators and other relevant participants from outside higher education as appropriate. The peer review panels will evaluate the internal quality management systems set up by institutions to check on and improve quality in the three core functions of teaching, research and community engagement. The purpose of the audit is to encourage and support institutions to identify their own academic strengths and shortcomings, and to take proactive steps to address the areas in need of attention in a systematic and institution-wide way. Eventually, this should impact on all particular programmes and qualifications offered by institutions. One public higher education institution and three private institutions are being evaluated in 2004, followed by three public and six private providers in 2005. An executive summary of the institutional evaluation report will be available to the public on the CHE's website, thus making it possible for any interested party to have a better sense of how quality issues are addressed by institutions in all their core functions.

### **Programme accreditation**

All new programmes which public and private providers want to offer will have to be evaluated by the HEQC before they can be offered to see if they meet minimum standards of quality. Again, teams of experts will go on site to carry out the evaluation on behalf of the HEQC, and the findings will be publicly available. The new programme accreditation system will kick in at the end of 2004. Through the new programme accreditation system, it will become much more difficult for poor quality programmes to enter the system, thus providing greater protection to students in the long run. Because of the very large number of existing programmes on offer, the HEQC will not be able to evaluate them all, except where it carries out national reviews like the MBA review.

The HEQC will continue with its national reviews of the MBA type. The next area for review will be a selection of teacher education programmes. Planning for this review is in the early stages, and as with the MBA review, all the relevant stakeholders will be involved in the process of developing the criteria and preparing for the review.

### **Quality Promotion and Capacity Development**

The HEQC is also promoting quality through a number of initiatives. One such initiative is the development of a set of guides to good practice to strengthen teaching and learning in a number of areas like programme development and review, student assessment and moderation, etc. These guides will be published on the CHE/HEQC website by the end of 2004, and it is hoped that they will be used by higher education teachers and curriculum and programme planners to strengthen teaching and learning in higher education.

Another initiative of the HEQC is a quality literacy campaign aimed at making students more aware of quality issues in higher education. It is hoped that the campaign will enable students to ask the right questions about the quality of the programmes for which they have enrolled and also to become involved in internal academic structures which undertake curriculum planning and quality assurance.

The HEQC also has a project underway to support merging institutions and historically disadvantaged institutions to prepare for the HEQC's requirements for institutional audit and programme accreditation. In addition, it is running a range of workshops to train institutional auditors and programme evaluators to participate more effectively in the peer review system of the HEQC.

## **Conclusion**

The above gives some indication of how the HEQC is seeking to ensure that the new higher education landscape in South Africa will have quality education as a priority in all sectors of higher education, whether public or private, university or university of technology, historically advantaged or disadvantaged, foreign or local.

In developing and implementing a new quality assurance and quality development system in South African higher education, the HEQC is in line with trends in higher education policy in many countries around the world, as stakeholders ask more searching questions about higher education and what it offers to society and the economy. What the HEQC has tried to do in its own systems development is to link the quality objectives with the transformation agenda in higher education in such a way that quality and excellence become as fundamental and non-negotiable as increased access and success, and social and economic responsiveness in higher education.

The responsibility for improved quality and the pursuit of excellence is, in the first instance, the responsibility of higher education institutions themselves. Planning, resource allocation and monitoring at institutions will have to take quality issues into account much more explicitly than before. The HEQC's role is to provide an enabling framework for institutions to take primary responsibility for quality and to validate the self-evaluation of institutions themselves about what they are doing well and where they need improvement. The HEQC can take many measures to facilitate and monitor quality but one of the most effective safeguards against poor quality programmes and fly-by-night providers is the active involvement of well informed students in quality assurance issues at their institutions. The HEQC's quality literacy programme will hopefully increase the ability of students to 'blow the whistle' on quality issues much more than has been the case till now.