

A QUALITY ASSURANCE  
FRAMEWORK (QAF) FOR  
HIGHER  
EDUCATION IN  
SOUTH AFRICA



COUNCIL ON HIGHER EDUCATION

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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).

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AFRICA**

**2021**

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## FOREWORD BY THE CHAIRPERSON OF COUNCIL



**Prof N Themba Mosia**

The Council on Higher Education (CHE) is responsible for quality assurance within the higher education sector. The CHE has its genesis in the Higher Education Act (Act No. 101 of 1997, as amended), which stipulates its mandate to advise the Minister responsible for higher education on all matters pertaining to higher education, promote quality in higher education, audit the quality assurance (QA) mechanisms of higher education institutions and accredit their programmes. The mandate of the CHE was significantly expanded by the promulgation of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Act (Act No. 67 of 2008, as amended). The NQF Act proclaimed the CHE as the sole Quality Council for higher education in South Africa, responsible for, among other functions, developing and managing the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF), and developing standards for higher education qualifications.

During the past two decades, the CHE has made significant progress in all its functions. Regarding its external quality assurance (EQA) function, the foundations were laid out in the founding document of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), and the intentions, principles and values therein remain relevant. The CHE has succeeded in embedding quality assurance into the fabric of the higher education sector in South Africa and all higher education institutions, both public and private, have some form of quality assurance system, policies and practices in place, albeit at different levels of maturity.

To date, the CHE, through the HEQC, has completed the first cycle of institutional audits covering mainly public universities and a few private higher education institutions. It has also completed a sector-wide quality promotion initiative, the Quality

Enhancement Project (QEP) and the extensive process of aligning more than 10 000 higher education programmes to the HEQSF. As from 2020, higher education institutions have been offering only HEQSF-aligned qualifications for the first-time enrolment of students whilst teaching non-aligned legacy programmes to completion.

After reflecting on the progress made over the past two decades in the area of quality assurance, the CHE made a conscious decision to develop a new external QA model and approach that would potentially improve and strengthen the quality of higher education provisioning. The QAF aims to do this through a sharp focus on learning and teaching, developing quality standards and guidelines, and requiring institutions of higher education to reflect more critically on, and respond more deliberately to the need for producing graduates with the necessary attributes that would enable them to function effectively in a radically changing society and the world of work.

Through its conceptualisation of the QAF, Council has, during the current decade, played an active oversight role in the preparations for changing the strategic direction of its EQA function. While developing the new QAF, the higher education sector experienced a period of uncertainty due to the spread of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Learning and teaching were severely affected, with many institutions having to resort to emergency remote teaching. The challenges that emerged focused the spotlight on the quality of provisioning and highlighted the importance of institutional quality assurance and capacity development.

It is a fortunate coincidence that the QAF was developed at such an opportune time when higher education institutions found themselves facing difficult management challenges in respect of learning and teaching. During consultations on the QAF, higher education institutions indicated strong support for the major shifts that the QAF will make in its external quality assurance function. The institutions will need to assume greater responsibility and accountability for the quality of institutional offerings. In order to support institutions, the CHE will embark on a capacity development drive to strengthen the internal quality assurance mechanisms of institutions.

The CHE will also aim to improve the efficiency of its own QA processes through collaboration with higher education institutions and stakeholder partners, such as the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). This collaboration is critical as the DHET and SAQA



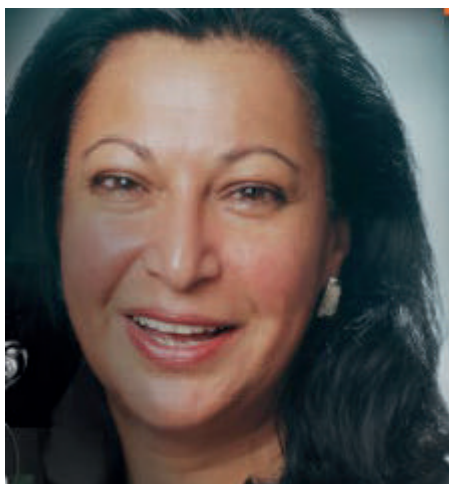
will only register qualifications and programmes once the CHE has accredited them. To simplify and streamline the process of accreditation and registration, the CHE, the DHET and SAQA are working together to develop a shared online application and registration portal. The professional bodies also play an essential role in quality assurance by ensuring that the programmes from which students graduate will lead to their licensing for professional practice. The CHE acknowledges the crucial complementary role played by professional bodies and a concerted effort is being made to collaborate with the various statutory professional bodies that elect to sign a memorandum of agreement (MoA) with the CHE.

The QAF is a new, progressive and ambitious quality assurance initiative that provides a broad overarching framework for qualification accreditation and a range of quality reviews. Therefore, new sub-frameworks and manuals will be developed for the various QA functions under the QAF, which will replace the existing frameworks for those functions. It is anticipated that the QAF will be able to steer institutions towards assuming greater accountability and responsibility for revitalised internal quality assurance (IQA) regimes. Its differentiated approach is expected to incentivise HEIs to demonstrate their high-quality IQA mechanisms. Furthermore, the quality standards and focus on graduate attributes in the QAF in the context of a dynamically changing world of work will be of relevance and interest to government, industry, professional bodies and the general public.

It is only through strong commitment, cooperation and collaboration with HEIs and other important role-players mentioned above that the vision and objectives in the QAF for a new QA dispensation for higher education can be realised.

**Prof N Themba Mosia**  
**Chairperson of Council**

## PREFACE BY THE CHAIRPERSON OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION QUALITY COMMITTEE



**Prof Angina Parekh**

The Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) is a permanent committee of the Council on Higher Education (CHE), which is assigned the responsibility of fulfilling the quality assurance and promotion mandate of the CHE by the Higher Education Act (Act No. 101 of 1997, as amended). Over the past two decades, the HEQC has established and spearheaded the implementation of an external quality assurance (EQA) system based on the philosophy, principles, values and approaches articulated in the *HEQC Founding Document* (2001). In the early days of the HEQC, the critical quality assurance mechanisms were institutional audits, the accreditation of programmes, and focused capacity development of quality assurance within the higher education sector. This was followed by the development of a process of national reviews commencing with the MBA. Following the promulgation of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Act (Act No. 67 of 2008, as amended), the HEQC developed a Framework for National Reviews in 2012 and Standards Development in 2014. The latter functions have now been embedded within the functions of the HEQC and have enhanced the battery of quality assurance tools.

In 2015, when the process of aligning higher education programmes to the Higher HEQSF was well underway, the HEQC initiated discussions through various forums to deliberate on how its quality assurance functions could be improved in terms of validity, reliability, efficiency and effectiveness. Central to these discussions was the need for the HEQC to be responsive to the rapidly changing higher education sector. Simultaneously, the CHE—through various interactions with the sector as well as

stakeholder bodies like the DHET, SAQA and the professional bodies—began to streamline and align its internal operations.

Responding to the need for the strengthening of a quality culture within the sector while discharging its functions, the HEQC embarked on a project to develop a new QAF for the higher education sector. This has required extensive consultations, the mobilisation of researchers, engagements with peer experts and a benchmarking exercise on quality assurance developments internationally. The complexity of our higher education system required consultation with all the major players in the system to ensure that through this process of renewal and revisiting, the new framework would be coherent, robust and aligned with the functions of the HEQC. Vigorous intellectual critiques, debates and discussions took place, and there was deep introspection on the trajectory of quality assurance over the past two decades. This included a meta-analysis in determining how the performance of the HEQC in respect of quality assurance and promotion functions could be improved and enhanced in terms of their efficiency and effectiveness.

The result is a transformed quality assurance framework that is progressive, responsive and takes into account the myriad different needs of the higher education system. The intention is for the QAF to be the primary strategic driver for a changing quality assurance regime in higher education as we enter a new decade. There is an overriding consciousness that the QAF signals significant shifts that will have significant implications for higher education institutions. The first deviation from the existing quality assurance frameworks is the movement to the usage of standards, guidelines and criteria across all the functions of the HEQC. This is aligned with the approach of different countries that apply the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) and/or the African Standards and Guidelines (ASG).

The primary unit of analysis for the HEQC will be the higher education institutions. Pivotal to the QAF is the integration of information to develop and continuously update a consolidated quality record for each institution. The processes needed to arrive at this will require alignment within the HEQC of the different functions to analyse the outcomes of quality assurance processes for each institution. The intention is that this will enable the HEQC to develop a holistic and integrated view of the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance mechanisms of the institutions in managing the quality of their higher education provision. The QAF accepts recognition of differentiation,

which creates the space for the HEQC to respond with agility to the quality assurance needs of higher education institutions. There will be a strong focus on developing the effectiveness of internal quality assurance systems within institutions, providing support where required and enabling those with robust systems to flourish.

Since the advent of democracy, the establishment of the NQF and subsequently of the HEQSF, debates have raged on about whether accreditation should be for programmes or qualifications. The QAF puts these debates to rest by opting to accredit qualifications and leaving the internal approval of programmes developed around the qualifications to the higher education institutions. This shift is predicated on the assumption that higher education institutions will have rigorous internal processes for the approval and review of programmes leading to accredited qualifications. The HEQC will provide support and capacity development on an ongoing basis where a need exists.

Quality reviews will be flexible, broader in scope and conducted at an institutional or national level, and either a qualification or thematic level. They will be undertaken for both public and private higher education institutions and will have varied purposes and differentiated outcomes.

In developing this QAF, technological innovation will be critical to the optimisation of the validity, reliability, efficiency and effectiveness of the external quality assurance functions of the CHE. Compiling an integrated quality assurance record in the form of a QA-dashboard for each institution will require the development of a new information technology architecture to support the QAF. The DHET, SAQA and the CHE are working on a collaborative project to develop a single shared online platform for the approval, accreditation and registration of qualifications. This is a significant shift to ensure that information provided by institutions does not require duplication and that there is the integrity of information at the national level. The higher education sector has for years been arguing for coherent, integration of information by the DHET, the CHE, SAQA and professional bodies. The proposed Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) that statutory professional bodies have been invited to sign will also mark a progressive step towards eliminating the duplication of functions between the HEQC and statutory professional bodies.

The QAF is an ambitious project and a step in the right direction as it strives for efficiency and effectiveness while enabling higher education institutions to develop robust internal quality assurance systems. During the period of consultation, there has been tremendous support for the QAF as it resonates with a differentiated higher education sector while striving for the achievement of coherence and integration. It is acknowledged that the QAF will require the HEQC to develop a well-structured capacity development programme. The HEQC will ensure that the internal operations are aligned to the repurposed QAF.

The implementation of the QAF will be phased in over a defined period and holds the promise of strengthening the higher education system in South Africa as we enter the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Prof Angina Parekh**  
**Chairperson: HEQC**

## CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER'S OVERVIEW OF THE QUALITY ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK



### **Dr Whitfield Green**

A high-quality South African higher education system is critical for the achievement of the national development goals and the transformation of society, and to meet the need for well-rounded graduates with attributes and competencies that are personally, professionally and socially valuable. Graduates of the higher education system should be able to play important roles in the socio-economic development of the country, to participate meaningfully in a robust civil society, to contribute to scientific and technological innovations, to become highly skilled professionals and to help find solutions to the many challenges that South Africa faces.

As the national body responsible for quality assurance in higher education, the Council on Higher Education (CHE) has been employing a quality assurance system that focuses on the programme and institutional levels. At the programme level, the CHE has deployed programme accreditation and national reviews as the key quality assurance mechanisms, while at the institutional level, it has used institutional audits as the primary approach to quality assurance. This quality assurance regimen has become well-established during the eighteen years since implementation and its impact and reach are undoubtedly extensive. It has, therefore become a relatively mature quality assurance system.

However, over time it has become apparent that the current higher education landscape differs significantly from that which provided the backdrop for the establishment of the CHE and the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), and the development of CHE/HEQC quality assurance regimen. For this reason, the CHE

could not rest on its laurels and continue in a business-as-usual fashion, which would have reduced the quality assurance system to a simple bureaucratic red tape that would add little value, if any, to a changing higher education system that is part of an even more rapidly changing macro-environment. It is against this background that the CHE undertook a process of developing a new quality assurance framework that encapsulates and reflects the realities of changing national, regional and global higher education systems. This publication is the final output of that process.

Through the QAF, the CHE commits to a reflexive and generative methodology for initiating and supporting a developmental and continuous improvement approach to quality assurance in higher education with the cooperation and collaboration of public and private higher education institutions. Similarly, as a standards development authority in higher education, the CHE commits to mediating between the diverse and complex contexts that exist in higher education institutions, and the expectations which emanate from the sector, its stakeholders and the broader society. Using Communities of Practice (CoPs), the CHE intends to develop valid and reliable standards that respect the autonomy of individual higher education institutions while recognising their interdependence and connectedness to the national quality assurance and qualification frameworks.

The QAF advocates, among other things, the foregrounding of quality and quality assurance in advancing national imperatives, including transformation, responses to the risks as well as the opportunities posed by the Fourth Industrial Revolution, environmental sustainability and the interrogation of ideas and epistemologies of knowledge in the service of society. Its deliberate focus on learning and teaching is predicated on the understanding that there is a close relationship between the quality of learning and teaching on the one hand, and good student experiences and academic success on the other. Learning and teaching is at the core of the functions that constitute the reasons for the existence of higher education institutions.

Furthermore, the QAF underscores the complementarity between external and internal quality assurance. The primary responsibility for the provision of quality higher education rests with the higher education institutions themselves, and the CHE as an external quality assurance agency should play validation and oversight roles. Institutions are urged and will be supported to establish and sustain effective internal mechanisms to facilitate the offering of quality higher education and generate and

provide reliable information for internal qualification and programme-related planning, self-evaluation and public reporting. The QAF relates quality maturity specifically to the integrity and effectiveness of the internal quality assurance system that each higher education institution should develop to support its academic project, which includes striving towards making a meaningful contribution to the discovery, construction, dissemination and use of knowledge within a differentiated higher education system.

The QAF is futuristic in its perspective and therefore focuses on innovation, as evidenced by its emphasis on the use of information communication technology (ICT) and the generation of new knowledge, ideas and methodologies as integral to institutionalising quality in higher education. It makes a fundamental shift from a bureaucratic and top-down model that leans more towards compliance to one that is driven by the ethos of accountability, fitness of, and fitness for purpose, and the quest for continuous improvement.

Through the QAF, the CHE reaffirms that its quality assurance work will continue to be anchored in integrity and independence. In implementing the QAF, the CHE will maintain its independence and ensure that extraneous factors will not influence its decisions and recommendations. Mechanisms will be put in place to ensure that the external experts who are engaged will not have conflicts of interest. Furthermore, it will strive to ensure that while relevant stakeholders will be consulted in the course of quality assurance processes, the final outcomes of such processes and the final decisions will remain its responsibility.

The QAF has to be championed at multiple levels of the higher education system, and at institutional level, the success of its implementation will depend very much on the extent to which the governance structures, and the leadership and management structures champion its implementation.

The CHE acknowledges the critical role played by Prof Kethamonie Naidoo, Director: Programme Accreditation, who volunteered to take on the challenge of driving the process of developing the QAF. Her dedication, excellent networking and project management skills, as well as her thorough understanding of quality assurance, contributed immensely towards ensuring that a sound QAF could be developed within the reasonable period of eighteen months. The CHE's sincere appreciation is



extended to all members of the various working groups and advisory panels whose inputs in the process helped shape the QAF. The comments from public and private higher education institutions and other stakeholder bodies are equally valued. The spirit of collaboration and partnership between the CHE and higher education institutions needs to be sustained for the advancement of the higher education system.

The work of conceptualising and developing the QAF was undertaken during Prof Narend Baijnath's term as Chief Executive Officer of the CHE. His contribution to the QAF project is acknowledged with appreciation.

Finally, it is essential to acknowledge that the conceptualisation and development of the QAF took place under the able stewardship of the HEQC and Council. The CHE and the sector at large will remain indebted to these two important structures since without their foresight and effective oversight, the QAF would have remained a pipedream.

**Dr Whitfield Green**  
**Chief Executive Officer: CHE**

## ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS FRAMEWORK

CHE	Council on Higher Education
CoPs	Communities of Practice
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
EQA	External Quality Assurance
HE	Higher Education
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
HEMIS	Higher Education Information Management System (for public higher education institutions)
HEQCIS	Higher Education Quality Committee Information System (for private higher education institutions)
HEQSF	Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework
IQA	Internal Quality Assurance
NDP	National Development Plan
NLRD	National Learner Records Database
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
QA	Quality Assurance
QAF	Quality Assurance Framework
QC	Quality Council
QCTO	Quality Council for Trades and Occupations
QM	Quality Management

QEP	Quality Enhancement Project
QPCD	Quality Promotion and Capacity Development
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
SER	Self-Evaluation Report

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Terminology used in this report

Codes of Practice	Codes of practice articulate the expectations for acceptable levels of educational provision and experiences for higher education students and the public. The Codes may provide guidance on how to judge measures of quality. Codes of practice may also be developed for research and community engagement, as well as for support functions such as student administration, student support or continuous professional development. They support the generation of criteria for such judgements but do not in themselves provide specific criteria for such judgements.
Communities of Practice	Communities of Practice are expert groups of peers representing knowledge fields and disciplines, or professional practices in higher education CoPs, and are the preferred origins of standards for the QAF.
Criteria	Criteria are benchmarks for evaluation and for making quality judgements about higher education activities based on the standards and guidelines agreed upon by the Higher Education (HE) sector.
Curriculum	<p>The curriculum is a structure that distributes access to knowledge and to knowing by specifying what is taught, who is taught, who teaches, how it is taught and how learning is assessed. The curriculum is therefore politically, socially and culturally constructed.</p> <p>The term curriculum encompasses:</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge, such as the list of subjects, topics and resources included in a course of study</li> <li>• Ways of knowing, skills, values and practices</li> <li>• Teaching methodologies</li> <li>• Assessment practices</li> </ul> <p>All curricula are informed by the nature of the discipline/field, the philosophical beliefs of the designer, who the students are and the broader context in which the curriculum is enacted. A curriculum encompasses the planned process, the actual implementation of the teaching and the students' experiences of the learning process. It also includes awareness of the 'hidden curriculum', that is, the unwritten, unofficial and often unintended lessons, values and perspectives that a curriculum promotes and enacts.</p>
Differentiation	Differentiation, in the context of the Quality Assurance Framework (QAF), refers to institutional functional differences and their differences in respect of identities, missions and quality management maturity.
External Quality Assurance (EQA)	External quality assurance is the means by which an external quality agency ensures that institutions have Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) systems in place to manage the quality of their activities and educational provision. It also ensures that the qualifications and programmes that they offer have been peer-reviewed to ensure that the provisioning

	meets the quality standards and criteria of the Council on Higher Education (CHE).
Generative Methodology	A generative methodology, in the context of the QAF, is a method for developing and reflecting on standards and their associated guidelines that creates a deeper understanding in the users of the standards and guidelines to find opportunities for solutions and innovation in order to stay agile and be relevant.
Graduate Attributes	Graduate attributes are the qualities, knowledge, skills and values that students should acquire at an institution through their varied experiences. They include critical thinking, ethical and professional behaviour of a graduate and the capacity of a graduate to take what has been learnt beyond the site of learning in order to become an active citizen.
Guidelines	Guidelines, in the context of the QAF, explain why a particular standard is important and describes how standards might be interpreted and implemented in different contexts.
Internal Quality Assurance (IQA)	IQA refers to the integrated institutional system, policies and process used by an institution to manage the quality of its core and associated functions of learning and teaching, research and community engagement, determined by the outcomes of that institution.
National Review	A national review is a peer-driven evaluation of an aspect of the provision of education provisioning by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across the

	sector, e.g., programmes or qualifications, or aimed to ensure that threshold standards are being met
Professional Body	A Professional body is an organisation of expert practitioners in an occupational field, including an occupational body that may be statutory or non-statutory.
Programme	A programme refers to a purposeful and structured set of learning activities designed to enable a student to meet the outcomes necessary for the award of a qualification.
Qualification	A qualification refers to the formal recognition and certification of learning achievement awarded by a higher education institution and that is registered on the South African National Qualifications Framework (NQF).
Quality Assurance	Quality assurance in higher education in South Africa involves evaluating and providing evidence of the extent to which institutions have put in place the measures needed to achieve i) the goals and purposes they have identified for themselves and ii) programmes that are able to deliver a set of learning experiences which will support students in attaining the qualifications to which they lead.
Quality Assurance (QA) Dashboard	QA-Dashboards are digital track records for each of the higher education institutions in which institutional data is visually presented, and where the decisions of previous EQA activities are collated, analysed and interpreted per institution. The information is harvested and aggregated from diverse informational sources for analytical

	<p>purposes to produce the dashboards. The information on the QA-dashboards will form important input into future EQA activities, in order to streamline, simplify, differentiate and integrate the EQA activities.</p>
Quality Enhancement	<p>The development and implementation of initiatives by an institution to raise its standards and the quality of its provisioning beyond threshold standards and benchmarks.</p>
Quality Improvement	<p>Quality Improvement is the development by an institution of a planned programme of activities to institutionalise a quality culture and to provide for better quality than existed previously. This may be as a direct response to an internal institutional review or an external peer review, e.g., by the CHE or a professional body.</p>
Quality Management System	<p>A quality management system refers to the institutional arrangements for assuring, supporting, developing and enhancing, as well as monitoring the quality of learning and teaching, assessment, research, and community engagement.</p>
Quality Promotion	<p>Quality promotion is the development of a programme of activities to institutionalise a quality culture in higher education in addition to the institution's commitment to continuous quality improvement.</p>
Reflexivity	<p>Reflexivity, in the context of the QAF, is the cyclical process of reflection on, and in action for a sustained improvement of quality over time.</p>
Review Cycle	<p>A Review Cycle is a finite series of engagements for each individual institutional review from</p>



	<p>initiation, through the Self-Evaluation Report (SER) preparation, site visit, final review report, improvement plans and reporting, to a final close-out report approved by the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC). Each cycle should culminate in a process of reflection by the CHE on the cycle to distil a picture of the state of quality in the system, and to identify major weaknesses, imperatives for refinement and /or changing the methodology for the next cycle, as necessary.</p>
Standards	<p>Standards are codes of practice for quality assurance in higher education, considered and adhered to by HEIs in all aspects of their activities and in all types of higher education provision.</p>

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This quality assurance framework (QAF) was conceptualised at a juncture in South Africa's history that presented both unprecedented challenges and novel opportunities for innovative change. The higher education (HE) system in the country faces interrelated challenges about socio-economic development, the contextual relevance of knowledge production and dissemination, rapid advances in technology, the continuing need for systematic, societal and economic transformation, and the increasing fragility of the planetary ecosystem due to environmental degradation.

After two decades of managing external quality assurance (EQA), the Council on Higher Education (CHE) is changing its EQA model in the dynamically changing higher education sector. The QAF aims to simplify processes and provide higher education institutions (HEIs) with greater self-regulation, responsibility and accountability for the quality management (QM) of their provisioning for HE through their internal quality assurance (IQA) systems. As the Quality Council (QC) for HE, the CHE will fulfil its EQA responsibility through its QA functions of standards development, quality promotion and capacity development (QPCD), quality reviews and accreditation of qualifications. In the QAF, the CHE emphasises a developmental approach to building and supporting internal quality assurance in institutions. This will be balanced by the need for accountability to ensure that HE standards are met.

Many points of departure have influenced the design of the QAF. Examples of these are:

- the mandate of the CHE to manage qualifications on the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) (Council on Higher Education 2011a);
- the completion by the CHE of the HEQSF qualifications alignment process so that from 2020 only HEQSF-aligned programmes will be offered by HEIs;
- the timing of the shift from programme accreditation to qualification accreditation in the QAF;
- the fact that established HEIs have IQA systems in place at varying levels of maturity and that, with the necessary support, they will be able to develop their

own unique and fully functional internal integrated quality management systems (IQMSs) (Council on Higher Education 2011b);

- the reality that quality improvement and quality enhancement are best achieved when they are institutionally driven, requiring institutions to have greater self-regulation over the quality of their core functions of learning and teaching, research and community engagement;
- the primary focus of the CHE in the first phase of the QAF, being learning and teaching, and examining the functions of research and community engagement in relation to the learning and teaching function;
- the contextual realities that ways of knowing, learning, working and being are undergoing radical change, meaning that greater flexibility and innovation are necessary for applying the diverse ways in which HEIs manage their core business, operations and IQA. These developments were foregrounded in the institutional responses to the COVID-19 pandemic that impacted the country in 2020;
- the fact that the CHE will have a more significant impact on quality development if it focuses on the institution as to its primary unit of analysis. This focus requires an integration of insights into institutional quality gained from the CHE's different EQA functions as they relate to particular institutions; and
- the shifts in the QAF are in line with many international QA trends. They have been informed by lessons learnt from the comprehensive focus in the first cycle of audits, the quality enhancement project (QEP), recommendations from CHE's self-evaluations and the identified needs of the sector.

As part of the broader post-school education and training sector, the CHE will work in collaboration with other regulatory authorities, such as the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO), Umalusi and statutory professional bodies (PBs). The EQA processes need to be simplified and streamlined to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the system. The collaboration will also enhance the achievement of national higher education goals, such as articulation and transformation, and address concerns about the proliferation of programmes and qualifications.

The following section covers the priorities, purpose, approach, objectives and principles of the QAF.

## **2. THE QUALITY ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK (QAF)**

In conceptualising this QAF, the CHE undertook a historical analysis of the legislative and CHE contexts and higher education and quality assurance (QA) trajectories over the past two decades. It also examined current international and national trends and undertook a needs analysis based on evaluations and consultations. Based on the outcomes of these initiatives, the CHE outlined the following set of priorities, purposes, objectives and principles for the QAF.

### **2.1 Priorities for the QAF**

The QAF identifies the following priorities:

- The development of an integrated approach to QA, in which the CHE's various EQA functions operate synergistically to support its advisory role and the planning of its QPCD activities. This integrated approach will also inform the HEQC's integrated, evidence-based quality decisions about institutions and sector-wide analyses, reflection and knowledge production about higher education and its EQA functions.
- The development by the CHE of a range of quality standards and guidelines, developed by appropriate Communities of Practice to serve as a frame of reference for all EQA and IQA activities and as the basis for criteria for QA reviews, developments, improvements and enhancements.
- A focus on learning and teaching, with particular emphasis on pedagogic and curriculum renewal to support engagement with students as knowers and knowledge producers, with reference to:
  - curriculum design with formative assessment built-in as an integral component, which can promote student learning and induct students into the process and criteria for the assessment of their learning;

- the capacity of academic staff to review their own programmes as an essential precondition for reflective practice;
- the manner in which curricula interact with different knowledge traditions and sources of knowledge;
- the ability of curricula to address contemporary societal issues;
- the location of curricula that support, in flexible ways, learning and work pathways and student progression along these pathways;
- the design of pedagogies that assists students with becoming informed and engaged participants in academic practice;
- the contextually appropriate development by HEIs of coherent online and blended learning strategies utilising the possibilities provided by advancements in information communication technology (ICT) (The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 has expanded contextual relevance to aspects such as students' devices and data packages; the nature and data-load demands of the institution's learner management system in conjunction with the pedagogy; and the conditions at homes or study environments in which students must function and complete assessments); and
- the development of academic and support staff for curriculum and pedagogic renewal and engagement with technologies;
- a focus on HEIs as sites of personal, cultural, societal and political change so that students, graduates and the institutions themselves have positive personal and social experiences that have a constructive impact and contribute to personal development and societal transformation. The recent student protests around decolonisation issues and the manifestations of gender-based violence and harassment affecting both staff and students provide a particular lens for this priority;
- a review of the HEQSF to, among other things, stem the proliferation of qualifications on the NQF and promote a HEQSF that focuses more on the knowledge, skills, competencies, ethics and values in the qualification as the

basis for programme design, admission and articulation. The CHE will work in partnership with the DHET and SAQA and with the sector in the review process;

- assessment of the HEIs' institutional IQA systems for the integrated management of the quality of their core functions at all levels. This includes the development of a coordinated and streamlined approach towards the CHE's accreditation of qualifications and the institutions' peer review and self-approval of their associated programmes; and
- the capability of institutions to identify, collect, analyse and interpret data, including student feedback, in order to support student retention and success in flexible ways and to conduct integrated academic planning and quality improvements.

## **2.2 Purpose of the QAF**

The purpose of the QAF is to put in place a QA system that strengthens and enhances the quality of higher education provisioning, thereby contributing to knowledge generation and construction, dissemination and application. This focus entails connecting the quality of the academic project, which includes learning and teaching, research and community engagement, to the broader social purpose of building a sustainable and equitable social order in South Africa while simultaneously ensuring global relevance.

The QAF focuses sharply on the learning and teaching, and educational experiences that institutions provide to their students, and on their personal development and the extent to which they prepare them as graduates for national, continental and global citizenship, capable of addressing complex societal, environmental, economic and political issues, and leading change and innovation. It emphasises the integrated and coherent way in which an institution's research agenda and community engagement initiatives support and contribute to the academic project in line with its unique vision, mission and identified goals.

Thus, the QAF is intended to be used as a strategic lever to a) strengthen the relevance of HEIs to social, environmental, economic issues and justice in South Africa; b) strengthen HEI accountability for quality; c) support HEIs in the development of robust quality cultures and appropriate structures; and d) focus attention on the academic project and pedagogic practices in the context of technological advancements. Ultimately the QAF should contribute to building confidence in the quality of higher education provisioning and HEI graduates in South Africa.

The QAF is based on the fundamental premise that HEIs are responsible for the quality of their core academic and support functions and that academic leadership, Communities of Practice, peer review and innovation work together to achieve continuous quality improvements and enhancements. Institutions should have the capacity to translate the information generated by both IQA and EQA mechanisms into institutional knowledge for institutional planning, academic leadership and innovation. In the QAF, the CHE draws attention to curriculum transformation, pedagogic renewal and the flexibility of provision. It does so in a way that engages HEIs to reflect critically on what their IQA findings indicate and how best to address them.

Engagement through dialogue is more likely to build understanding of how institutions could be more socially accountable to improve the quality of the educational experience of students. In using a generative and reflexive approach in executing its EQA functions in the QAF, the CHE will contribute positively to the academic project of higher education in South Africa.

### **2.3 Approach to External Quality Assurance**

The QAF continues to subscribe to the following definitions of quality in higher education, as set out in the HEQC Founding Document (HEQC 2001:9):

- (i) *Fitness of purpose* of an HEI based on national goals, priorities and targets, and the institution's understanding of and engagement with these;

- (ii) *Fitness for purpose* in relation to the HEI's specified vision, mission and strategic and academic planning in relation to *diversity and differentiation* in the South African HE sector;
- (iii) Value for money in relation to *effectiveness and efficiency* in relation to a range of parameters; and
- (iv) Transformation as it refers to social equity, quality and fundamental institutional cultural and academic change.

Drawing on these definitions, the QAF seeks to achieve an appropriate balance between quality development and accountability.

- Quality development focuses on the concepts of quality as fitness for purpose, system flexibility and transformation. In terms of quality development, the proposed QAF supports institutions in the pursuit of deliberate and systematic strategies for the enhancement and improvement of quality of their core and support functions. This means that all HEIs are expected to not only meet threshold standards, but to also build internal capacity, establish and support CoPs, enable innovation, cultivate academic leadership and engage students in flexible ways in a pedagogic process that will allow them to discover and understand knowledge and engage with it as part of their academic and personal development, and the development of the broader communities that they serve. Institutions should also strive for and demonstrate continuous improvement aligned to the aspiration of quality enhancement in learning and teaching, research and community engagement.
- With respect to accountability, the QAF adopts a fitness for purpose approach to ensure that HEIs have effective, coherent and impactful internal quality management systems and processes to deliver quality aligned to their missions, strategies and goals. The QAF adopts a fitness of purpose approach to assess the missions and strategies of HEIs against national goals and objectives for the sector and to ensure employability in its broader sense. The CHE also has a monitoring and evaluation function that enables it to provide evidence to demonstrate its value to the sector.



## 2.4 Objectives of the QAF

The QAF has developed the following objectives to assure the public regarding the extent and depth of an HEI's commitment to quality delivery:

- To develop and implement an agile future-oriented QA system that is responsive to the national planning and policy context, as well as a changing and differentiated HE sector and varying aspects of workplace requirements. Each of the EQA functions seeks to advance this goal by promoting reflexive and flexible practices, building CoPs, nurturing innovation, cultivating institutional investigative capacity, leading and implementing educational change, and building academic leadership relating to flexible curricula and pedagogy and the institutional functions that support these.
- To improve the quality of higher education in the sector through engagement with HEIs and QPCD initiatives.
- To support institutional innovation and responsiveness to national and international trends in the interest of creating a sustainable and equitable society.
- To develop a functioning EQA system to optimise its efficiency in relation to funding capacity and human resources, and form the basis for sector-wide analysis and intelligence.
- To harness synergies between the CHE's EQA functions so that they work together to form an integrated view of the QA performance of an institution, which the CHE will use as the basis for its differentiated focus during its engagement with institutions. Such engagement could relate to an institution's capacity development initiatives and lines of enquiry for conducting its functions of institutional reviews, qualification accreditation and national reviews. ICT advancements will be utilised to create an integrated view of an institution's QA systems and the quality of its provisioning. This integrated view, which the CHE refers to as an institutional QA-dashboard, displays different layers and levels of relevant quantitative and qualitative QA data and analyses relating to every institution and will be regularly updated. This is further elaborated on in Annexure A.

## **2.5 Principles of the QAF**

### **2.5.1 Institutional Responsibility and Accountability for IQA**

The primary responsibility of HEIs is to assure internal quality. They are accountable for the quality of learning and teaching, the educational experiences of their students, the competencies of their graduates and system flexibility, as well as for the quality and impact of their research and innovation outputs and activities, community engagement, academic support, staff development and the range of support services provided for the academic community. To do this, HEIs should ensure that they have well-established and fully functional IQA systems, appropriate plans, policies, structures, processes and networks, and the flexibility to assure quality across all their functions and operations, including the core academic activities, governance structures and management, administrative and support services. To ensure that all aspects of educational provision are functioning as planned, the CHE expects institutions to conduct their own self-reviews as part of regular institutional quality review cycles and to collect evidence that would inform continuous quality improvement and enhancement.

The QAF will facilitate and support development and assure the effectiveness of the HEI's IQA mechanisms in meeting the CHE's quality standards.

### **2.5.2 Integration**

Integration means that all aspects of the QA activities, regardless of whether they are the EQA activities of the CHE or the IQA activities of the HEIs, are interconnected and cannot exist or be understood independently of each other. The EQA functions were therefore designed and implemented with due regard for the interdependencies and interrelationships that exist in complex systems. The concept of integration can also be expanded to include the need to create intra- and interinstitutional connectedness, e.g. through the establishment of Communities of Practice. To assure system flexibility and agility, responsive Communities of Practice and collaboration between Communities of Practice are needed.

The QAF was built on the principle of structural and functional integration between the CHE's EQA functions and has identified the synergies between and among the different lenses that it will employ to assure quality at an institutional level in HEIs. An integrated approach to EQA is followed in the QAF. Central to this is the development of integrated track records of HEQC decisions on the findings and outcomes of various types of EQA reviews and qualification accreditation decisions for each institution, that is an institutional QA-dashboard view of QA information management data and analyses. Also central to this approach are communication and transparency between and within institutional units, as well as between institutions.

### **2.5.3 Fitness for Purpose and Fitness of Purpose**

The EQA system of the CHE for higher education has to be 'fit' for the South African context and a rapidly changing world. It has to deal with the ongoing challenge of transformation, which includes the need to widen both formal and epistemological access. To achieve this, it needs to track system flexibility to meet the needs of the students. The EQA system has to deal with challenges presented by a South African higher education system that is growing, is becoming increasingly complex, fluid and at times unstable, and has to be responsive to rapid advances in new technologies as well as the societal challenges that impact on higher education. In terms of fitness of purpose, the CHE has to fulfil its mandate in terms of both the Higher Education Act of 1997 and the NQF Act of 2008, as amended. In doing so, it needs to streamline its functions and processes to become an effective, efficient, responsive, innovative, and, if necessary, a disruptive external quality assurance agency.

### **2.5.4 Differentiation**

The adoption of a differentiated approach has various dimensions. The first dimension recognises that in the sector as a whole, institutions are at different levels of maturity in terms of the effectiveness of their IQA systems. This implies that some institutions may initially require more frequent and deeper engagements than others with respect to QA. The second dimension relates to the need to support institutions to achieve their differentiated missions. The CHE values and supports the uniqueness of different institutions and institutional types, which should be harnessed to strengthen the entire

system and not perpetuate inequities within the system. This is important as a lack of adequate attention to, and support for mission differentiation could lead to mission drift and inappropriate approaches to QA through standards that do not support mission differentiation. The third dimension relates to the importance of the QAF and its functions to be sensitive and responsive to the contexts of different institutions. In its engagement with institutions, the CHE recognises and respects the unique contexts in which each institution is situated.

In order to implement a differentiated approach, the CHE uses a reflexive and generative approach to the development of quality standards. This approach recognises that standards are quality codes that should be developed for all areas of quality management, but that they should be formulated in a manner that allows for the unique contexts and approaches of different institutions.

### **2.5.5 Simplification**

Simplification of the current system is essential to address the administrative burden currently faced by institutions. This means that EQA processes will be streamlined to eliminate and reduce the duplication of actions and information required from HEIs, and reduce the burden of reporting by institutions with well-established IQA systems. Wherever possible, EQA requirements and processes will be made more understandable and manageable without compromising their focus or pointedness, robustness and effectiveness. As part of this process, the streamlining of the information requirements for HEIs and statutory professional bodies will be considered. The integrated institutional QA-dashboards will assist in this process of simplification by building up a track record of the HEQC decisions for an institution.

Thus, the CHE intends to establish a streamlined, future-oriented, innovative and technology-supported system for the QA of the higher education sector.

### **2.5.6 Collaboration**

To ensure the credibility of the EQA system, all components of the system need to be developed in a consultative and collaborative manner. Higher education organisations, professional bodies and other key stakeholders have been extensively consulted to ensure that the processes and procedures in the QAF are fit for purpose, taking into consideration the contextual factors and that there is buy-in from stakeholders.

The QAF promotes collaboration between the CHE and other regulatory bodies such as the DHET, SAQA, the QTCO, Umalusi and statutory professional bodies based on a common understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the partners in the collaboration. The implementation of the QAF takes due cognisance of changes in their regulatory environments, the roles played by other regulatory bodies and agencies in the quality assurance of qualifications and programmes, including qualifications on the OQSF, and qualifications in professional fields. Enhanced communication within and between entities is needed to streamline the quality assurance processes further.

### **2.5.7 Innovation**

The QAF is designed for the future and is innovative, agile and developmental in its differentiated approach to institutions. Innovation in the context of quality management refers, among other things, to the capabilities required to generate and apply new knowledge, ideas or methods to help drive, sustain and nurture quality improvement efforts in higher education to achieve better outcomes and more efficient and effective process and services. The CHE has used innovative ways to optimise the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of its QA functions, for example in the way it will use ICT to optimise the manner in which it collects and analyses data obtained from the HEIs.

## **3. DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE QAF**

The conceptualisation of the QAF is the result of an extensive process of research, benchmarking, participation and consultation, and its key design features are described below. These design features have influenced the significant shifts in the

QAF from the CHE's current approach to a new way of managing some of its EQA functions. The design features of the QAF and the EQA functions were informed by the purpose, objectives and general principles of the QAF and its approach to quality.

### **3.1 Design features of the QAF**

The main design features of the QAF are the following:

- i. The EQA functions will base their engagement with HEIs on the quality management of their own strategic plans and missions through the functioning of their IQA systems, given that HEIs in South Africa are autonomous institutions exercising academic freedom and functioning within unique histories, contexts and identities. If they are to be successful, HEIs should take ownership of their quality development, assurance, improvement and quality enhancement.
- ii. The QAF will use learning and teaching, and the flexibility of this learning and teaching, as the primary lens through which the EQA functions of the CHE will examine the effectiveness of the HEIs' IQA systems. Learning and teaching are seen as the fulcrum around which the fundamental core and support activities of HEIs should be managed through their IQA systems. Learning and teaching constitute a broad encompassing area that allows for a student-centred focus related to learning and the facilitation of learning, and assessment through a well-designed curriculum, learning experiences and student support at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. It encompasses issues of institutional management and staff development at all levels, the integration of research and community engagement into the academic project, issues of curriculum and pedagogy, personal, social and professional development of students, graduate attributes and employability.

Since the learning and teaching area is highly dynamic and is impacted on by external change, system flexibility and agility are needed. An example of such a change is the emergency shift to remote provisioning by many contact learning and teaching HEIs due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020,

which affected and changed the ways in which things were previously done. A shift of this kind is likely to influence HEIs' future modes of provisioning, and their IQA systems should therefore support the management of such shifts. Likewise, the CHE's EQA system should be flexible in its approach when engaging with institutions, the changes they made and the adaptation of their IQA systems to those changes. This will also enable the CHE to provide timely and appropriate quality promotion and capacity development interventions. In its EQA toolkit, the CHE will have a variety of known and new instruments, such as national reviews and themed reviews, for a more flexible and targeted focus on selected pertinent areas of the quality management system, including those related to learning and teaching.

- iii. A developmental approach will be adopted for its EQA functions through the development of standards and guidelines, quality promotion and capacity development, and peer engagement. This means that the EQA functions will follow a particular approach and methodology, known as a reflexive and generative methodology, to support a developmental and continuous-improvement approach to quality in HEIs during the CHE's EQA functions. This will be further elaborated on below.
- iv. Where possible and appropriate, the EQA activities will be based on standards and guidelines developed by CoPs as codes of practice. Standards and guidelines may form the basis for the criteria to be developed for evaluation and for making consistent judgements on the effectiveness of the functioning of the IQA systems of HEIs, that is QA policies, procedures and practices in HEIs.
- v. Ensuring that HEIs remain accountable for the quality of their higher education provision is a vital function of the CHE as the Quality Council for higher education. Should HEIs be unable to remedy identified quality weaknesses within specified timeframes through their IQA mechanisms, the CHE may be compelled to apply more stringent measures to protect the public against poor quality educational provision.
- vi. The institution is the CHE's primary unit of analysis for its EQA function in examining the quality of an HEI's higher education provisioning and its supporting administration systems. The data from various institutional reports and the findings from the different EQA processes will be collated,

analysed and made available for use by the HEQC in making its decisions. The advantage of the HEQC basing its EQA decisions on an integrated analysis of institutional data and having the institution as its primary unit of analysis is that it concentrates the engagements of the CHE with an institution around significant quality concerns, which the institution will be able to manage more effectively.

- vii. ICT will be used to construct an institutional quality track record, which the CHE has termed the quality dashboard (QA-dashboard), to maintain a track record of the quality findings and HEQC decisions for each institution. This track record will be continuously updated after every institutional report and HEQC outcome.
- viii. In managing the HEQSF, the CHE will develop a technologically advanced information management system for the HE qualifications of the public and private higher education system. The system will have capabilities for sophisticated integrated data management and analytics. It will provide information for research, advice and policy formulation with due regard to information that is confidential to institutions.

### **3.2 The EQA Model**

The principles applied in the QAF are institutional responsibility and accountability for QA, system flexibility and agility, integration, fitness for purpose and fitness of purpose, differentiation, simplification, communication and collaboration, and innovation. In addition, the design features described above have also influenced the manner in which standards development, quality promotion and capacity development, reviews, and qualification accreditation will be conducted in the QAF.

#### **3.2.1 Major shifts in the QAF**

The QAF marks a significant shift in the approach and methodology of the CHE with regard to how it fulfils its EQA mandate. A few of the considerable shifts are highlighted below.



### ***3.2.1.1 Shift to qualification accreditation from programme accreditation***

The QAF emphasises the responsibility and accountability of the HEIs for the quality and quality assurance of the programmes they offer. The CHE will accredit qualifications in the QAF and leave the approval and review of the quality of new programmes and existing programmes to the HEIs, subject to the HEIs being able to demonstrate to the CHE that they have the internal capacities and capabilities to manage these processes through robust and effective IQA systems. The CHE will evaluate the effectiveness of the IQA systems and the evidence of the institutions' own approval and review of programmes in the QAF. The HEQC will accredit the qualifications and not the individual programmes leading to the qualifications, which will simplify and improve the efficiencies of the processes for both the institutions and the CHE.

### ***3.2.1.2 Using an integrated approach to EQA***

The CHE and the HEIs will need to work in an integrated way in the QAF. For the CHE, this means working across EQA functions and managing data on institutional quality in an integrated manner. For the HEIs this means being able to demonstrate a high level of functionality of the various elements of the IQA systems operating as part of a quality management system and being able to manage and use their quality-related data in an integrated and coherent way.

Based on the reviews and accreditation conducted by the CHE, the HEQC makes a number of decisions about quality management by institutions. The CHE also collects data from the reports submitted by institutions to the CHE, SAQA and the DHET, and professional bodies provide qualification-specific quality information. Institutional reports submitted to the CHE are in the form of self-evaluation reports, the Higher Education Quality Committee Information System (HEQCIS), the Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS) and Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) qualification information, which includes the required information for the National Learner Records Database (NLRD). The CHE will integrate and analyse the information obtained from these sources to form a comprehensive, synthesised and evidence-based perspective of institutional quality. Technology

provides solutions for such integration, and the CHE will construct a QA-dashboard consisting of both quantitative and qualitative information about an institution's management of its quality at all levels and aspects of its provisioning as an HEI offering qualifications on the HEQSF. Further information on the construction and use of the QA-dashboards is provided in Annexure A. For example, before conducting a review, all the pertinent quality-related information for the institution will be considered.

### ***3.2.1.3 Adopting a generative and reflexive methodology***

In line with the developmental approach in the QAF, the CHE will engage with institutions around standards and guidelines in a reflexive and generative way within the context of their own strategic plans and goals, missions, aspirations, histories and challenges. This shift in emphasis of the link between institutional IQA systems to their strategic plans will facilitate discussions around the HEIs' approach to quality management in terms of their fitness for purpose, fitness of purpose and agility. The shift from institutional audits to institutional reviews is also congruent with this engagement and the developmental approach of the QAF.

The QAF functions are designed to provide the tools and infrastructure needed to help organise QA initiatives and opportunities, and to promote a culture of systematic reflection and flexibility. The shift to the developmental approach is underpinned by the reflexive and generative methodologies and is intended to drive and nurture continuous sector-wide efforts to improve quality. These methodologies have the potential to produce more lasting, extensive and transformative outcomes with regard to the generation of innovative approaches to quality and mutually beneficial interactions with the sector, thereby fostering connectedness whilst acknowledging differences.

The CHE endeavours to nurture a spirit of internal dialogue that delves deeper and explores greater opportunities for innovation and flexibility in the sector. Since the HEIs are ultimately responsible for the provision of quality, they must be allowed space to be more internally driven to promote, cultivate and sustain efficiency and effectiveness in their pursuit of the provision of quality higher education.

Reflexivity allows for a cyclical process of reflection on and action to achieve sustained improvement of quality over time. It continually provides for opportunities to draw from an HEI's own strength and the good practices within the sector. The reflexive methodology allows for the exposure of quality concerns, and the generative design methodology is an iterative process that allows for the fine-tuning of thoughts and processes to remain agile and relevant. Inherent in these processes are opportunities for institutions and individuals to redesign processes and reinvent themselves. Of paramount importance to HEIs are the opportunities for questioning assumptions, examining current practices and realities, and continuously learning to gain more in-depth knowledge about themselves and their contexts.

#### **4. THE EQA FUNCTIONS IN THE QAF**

The functions of the CHE in the QAF have been reorganised to allow for greater flexibility, quality, effectiveness and efficiency in respect of its operations. The diagram below is a simple representation of the EQA functions in the QAF. It indicates that there are two overarching EQA functions, namely the development of standards and guidelines, and quality promotion and capacity development. These two functions cut across the other two functions, which are quality reviews and qualification accreditation. The diagram also indicates the responsibilities of the HEQC as the permanent standing committee of the CHE responsible for QA decision-making.

The EQA by the CHE is performed within the context of the CHE's responsibility as the Quality Council for higher education responsible for the management of the HEQSF. Hence, there is an inextricable link between the development of standards for qualifications on the HEQSF and the design, development and offering of programmes leading to those qualifications. In order to quality assure the qualifications, it will be necessary to review the programmes in terms of their curricula and related aspects of provisioning (e.g. learning and teaching, assessment, pedagogy, flexible student support, programme management and assessment, and all related communications to students). Data management relating to qualifications on the HEQSF, as well as data showing the articulation of the HEQSF qualifications in learning pathways for both public and private higher education provision is another

vital function of the CHE. This is linked in the QAF to the CHE's broader purposes of research and advice to the Minister of Higher Education and Training at a sector level and the narrower purpose of EQA of institutional quality for educational provisioning and the CHE's role as articulated in the integrated QAF system.

Table 1: Summary of QAF components

CHE functions	Development of standards and guidelines by Communities of Practice	
	Quality promotion and capacity development	
	Quality reviews	Qualification accreditation
HEQC functions	Evidence-based judgements on the quality management and effectiveness of the IQA systems of institutions for assuring quality of educational provision. The outcomes of reviews form the basis for QPCD and institutional development and improvement initiatives at various levels.	Accreditation of new qualifications and their recommendation to SAQA for registration on the NQF and the DHET. The HEQC grants every HEI a specified number of years for the accreditation of its qualifications, after which time the continued accreditation has to be confirmed.  Confirmation of accreditation of existing qualifications for private providers for a specified period, linked to their re-registration by the DHET. The differentiated period of time is based on the institution's integrated quality track record.
HEQSF management	HEQSF data warehouse, HEQSF online systems Integrated institutional quality – track record (QA-dashboards) HEQCIS data HEMIS data HEQSF data Analytical tools  Provider's submission of data to the shared, aligned and coherent integrated online submission system between the DHET, the CHE and SAQA (and PBs)	
Sector-level information and intelligence system, analysis, knowledge generation and quality-promotion advice to the minister		
Reports to the DHET Public accountability		

The EQA functions are briefly outlined below, and details of each function are provided in separate manuals.

#### 4.1 Development of Standards, Guidelines and Criteria

In order to realise and support the shift in emphasis from a compliance to a developmental approach, the QAF extends the notion of standards and guidelines to all its EQA functions. Together these complementary and interconnected functions and processes represent a continuum of EQA processes that can be used separately or in conjunction to have either stronger accountability or a more developmental orientation. The CHE will develop separate sets of standards, guidelines and criteria for various aspects of quality management.

Using the approach adopted by the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG 2015:9) for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (UNESCO 2015), and in line with the African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ASG 2018):

- The **Standards** are developed, agreed on and accepted as codes of practice for QA in higher education. They should therefore be taken into account and adhered to by HEIs in all aspects of their activities and all types of higher education provision.
- The **Guidelines** explain why the Standard is essential and describe how Standards might be interpreted and implemented in different contexts. They describe good practice in the area under consideration.
- The **Criteria** are based on the Standards and Guidelines that were agreed on by the sector. Through the formulation of questions, they form the benchmark for evaluation and quality judgements about HE activities.

The different kinds of standards employed in higher education include content standards, learning and teaching standards, standards for the assessment of student achievement, and standards for institutional performance. Standards typically differ concerning their purpose, use and scope.

The main aim of a national set of standards, as mandated to the CHE, is not to displace existing, internal means of quality assurance, but to provide for an agreed matrix of benchmarks against which institutional quality assurance and academic awards such as certificates can be evaluated. Their role is to provide benchmarks, agreed on by CoPs, to inform and guide the design, approval and, where required, the improvement of provision and other activities in higher education.

While acknowledging responsibility for reaching clearly defined standards as envisaged by the CHE mandate, this QAF emphasises the developmental aspect of the process, considering the many conceptual and contextual issues that are associated with the formulation of nationally agreed to and applied higher education standards. The Framework proposes that the development of standards is an ongoing

process that addresses many complex principles and involves a variety of interested parties. The development of standards needs to take into account a number of fundamental issues, including the need to play a meaningful role not only in establishing benchmarks for assuring quality but also in developing quality in the sector while recognising the fundamental importance of HEIs to promote their own internal processes of quality assurance. The standards should also take into account the diversity of students' needs based on the disparities of their contexts, such as the need for epistemological access and progression.

The development of standards and guidelines foster and provide a central role for codes of practice in that the preferred origins of standards are expert groups of peers representing knowledge fields and disciplines, or professional practices in higher education. As the standards development authority, the CHE must assure the embodiment of constitutional values and mediate between diverse influences and expectations emanating from the higher education sector, the state, the marketplace and civil society. It does this by grounding standards in codes of practice in the QAF. In this way, valid and reliable standards are developed that recognise the need among HEIs for self-regulation and acknowledgement of interdependence, thereby engaging difference and enacting connectedness.

The standards may also include guidelines that clarify aspects, concepts or terms used in the standards statement. To ensure that contextual diversity and institutional autonomy are recognised, the standard does not prescribe the actual design and implementation modes or evaluation of policies and practice.

#### **4.2 Quality Promotion and Capacity Development (QPCD)**

Quality promotion in the QAF entails facilitating the creation and maintenance of quality awareness, the development of quality responsiveness among providers of HE, inculcating a quality ethos among role players and developing and implementing policies for ensuring the integrity and credibility of QA.

The related function of capacity development entails building and enhancing individual and systemic knowledge, skills, competencies, ethics and values in quality assurance to enable the higher education system and HEIs to develop and maintain effective internal mechanisms for assuring the quality of provisioning.

An intensive programme of QPCD with HEIs to develop their IQA systems is an integral aspect of the QAF implementation plan. Quality promotion and capacity development cut across the EQA functions of the CHE. They take the form of sector- and institution-specific engagements about the development of curricula and the knowledge they contain, academic support and pedagogic learning and teaching strategies, and system flexibility and transparency, and also review and approve new and existing programmes. Engagement also focuses on how quality is measured, the interpretations of findings and their use in designing appropriate interventions aimed at quality improvement and enhancement. The engagements also focus on the monitoring and control of the interventions to be implemented, namely on closing the quality cycle loop.

Where feasible and to promote co-ownership of the interventions, quality promotion and capacity development initiatives are developed and executed in collaboration with HEIs. These participatory and inclusive methodologies seek to empower those involved, including students.

In line with the differentiated developmental approach in the QAF, more attention is given to institutions that need to strengthen their IQA systems. Furthermore, research and development work leading to the compilation of good practice guides on quality assuring specific aspects of learning and teaching, such as assessment and online provisioning, are developed. These assist HEIs with building knowledge and capacity for assuring, supporting, developing and enhancing, as well as monitoring the quality of relevant areas.

An important aspect of quality promotion and capacity development in the QAF is that the focus is not only on institutional quality assurance systems, units and professional

quality assurance staff, but on all levels of the institution, particularly on academic leadership, academic staff, academic developers and support, and the administration systems that support these, given the focus on learning and teaching. Institutions will also receive support with the development of capacity to prepare themselves for the new EQA processes in the QAF, and the development of quality cultures that permeate the institution from an individual academic's desk, through support staff to the management and leadership of the institution.

### **4.3 External Quality Reviews**

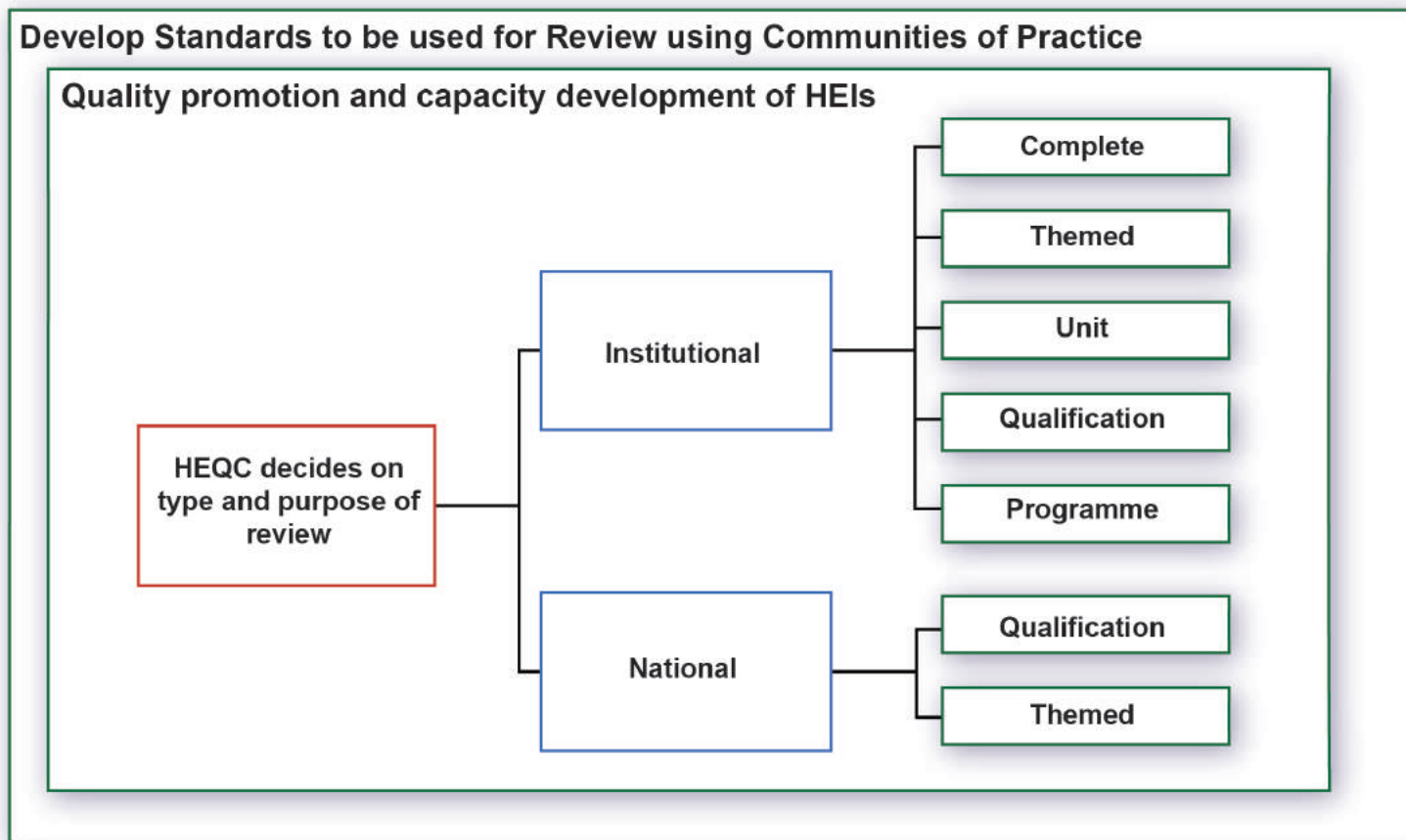
The CHE's responsibility through the reviews function is to maintain a robust EQA system that can develop, validate and support institutional IQA arrangements for maintaining the quality standards of academic provision through engagement (Council on Higher Education, 2018). Reviews will be based on a set of standards and guidelines for various aspects that have been developed by a community of practice through a reflexive and generative standards development process. An example of standards and guidelines used in the reviews would be those developed for institutional programme approvals and reviews.

#### **4.3.1 Types of Reviews**

The diagram below depicts the two main categories of external quality reviews conducted by the CHE, namely those conducted at an institutional level and those conducted at a national level, with different types of reviews for different purposes at both levels.



Table 2: External Quality Reviews



#### 4.3.1.1 Institutional Reviews

An institutional quality review is a peer-driven CHE process used to evaluate the coherence and effectiveness of an institution’s quality management system. Institutional reviews typically take a holistic approach with the focus on one or more of the three core functions of higher education, namely learning and teaching; research and community engagement, which include the enabling systems and functions that support them, such as governance, management, academic leadership and resource allocation; and professional, administrative and technical support services. Smaller structural, institutional units such as faculties, schools or departments may also be reviewed.

In the first review cycle of the QAF, the key focus will be a comprehensive institutional review on learning and teaching. This relates specifically to the IQA arrangements for qualification and programme design, curriculum development and review, and programme provisioning and quality management. It includes a focus on learning and

teaching, and assessment strategies, including the pedagogy and the manner in which research, community engagement and work-integrated learning (WIL) are integrated into the learning and teaching provision. This focus follows from the recommendation based on the HEQC evaluation (Council on Higher Education, 2007) and the QEP that was aimed at building institutional capacity for self-reflection and the improvement of the quality of learning and teaching (Council on Higher Education, 2014b). The relationship between the 2020 Institutional Audits and the Institutional Quality Reviews in the QAF will be spelt out in the QAF's implementation plan.

An institutional review cycle consists of a finite series of engagements. It begins with the initiation, through the preparation of the self-evaluation report and its portfolio of evidence, through the site visit, to the final review report, improvement plans and reporting to a final closeout report that is accepted by the HEQC. The understanding is that each institution will be subjected to regular review cycles, the frequency of which will be differentiated based on findings of the review panel and the institution's quality assurance track record, known as the QA-dashboard.

#### **4.3.1.2 National Reviews**

National reviews are used to assure the parity of standards among institutions in the higher education sector in South Africa. The standards are codes of practice that serve as national benchmarks to ensure that qualifications and processes within the sector are comparable. National reviews function at the higher education sector level by conducting reviews on particular qualifications or themes across the entire sector or parts of the sector.

At the qualification level, the national review evaluates the institution's capacity to offer qualifications and programmes of acceptable quality and provide opportunities for quality academic experiences. The institution is required to provide evidence of its capacity to deliver and sustain the qualifications being offered. For example, it could conduct a review of a Bachelor of Agriculture qualification at all institutions offering the qualification. The themes and units of analysis differ based on identified needs, such as the CHE could conduct a review of online assessment practices across the sector,

or of the student support services offered by private HEIs. Standards are developed by CoPs prior to a national review, should they not already exist.

In deciding to conduct a national review, the CHE takes into account factors such as identified areas of national need, significant academic developments within the field or discipline, concerns raised by HE stakeholders, or any other demonstrable substantive reason.

### **4.3.2 Methodology for Quality Reviews**

The methodology used for institutional and national quality reviews is generally the same. Within the broader context of quality promotion and capacity development, Communities of Practice contribute to the development of standards and guidelines. Guided by those standards and guidelines, institutions engage in a self-review process based on the outcomes of their own internal reviews. The CHE review is an external validation through an external peer-review process, which leads to the formulation of review recommendations and the HEQC review decisions. Before, during and after a review, there are engagements with the institution/s aimed at guiding, clarifying and discussing the review process, outcomes, and improvements and recommendations, if any.

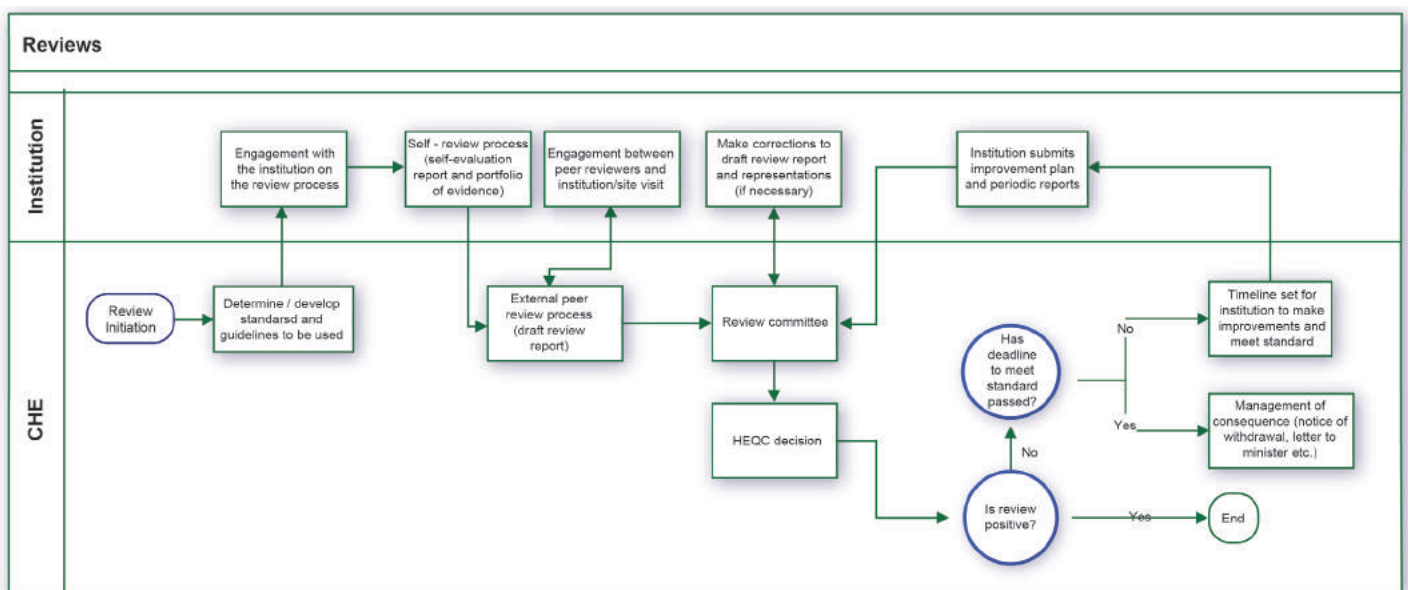
The unit of analysis for reviews varies according to the type and purpose of the review. For an institutional review, it will be the institution and its quality arrangements. In contrast, for a national review, the unit of analysis may be the qualification or programme, or a theme based on a sector review.

The review is conducted by a group of peers with relevant expertise. The members of the review panel study the self-evaluation report and evidence provided by the institutions and the summary reports of the integrated analysis of the QA information that the CHE has on the QA-dashboards for the institutions. This analysis may be used to inform the lines of enquiry for a review.

During the review, the peer reviewers engage with members at different levels of the institution on its quality management system, internal reviews and findings, quality improvements and enhancement. Reviews may be comprehensive, in which case they will include all the core and associated functions in an institution, or themed, which means that they will focus on a particular aspect, for example on its IQA system for programme approval and review, or its IQA system for assessment. During a review, the institution is expected to provide evidence to the peer-review panel that demonstrates the effective functioning of its IQA system, policies, processes and practices. Where appropriate, these should be aligned to the national standards and guidelines.

The review process is depicted in the diagram below:

Table 3: Review Process



### 4.3.3 Outcomes of Reviews

The outcomes of a review, which are published in a review report, vary depending on its purpose and terms of reference. A national review may contribute to sector-level advice on policy and quality promotion and development initiatives. In contrast, an institutional review may result in an HEQC decision that provides external validation of the effectiveness of the quality of the general or particular areas of functioning of an institution, influencing the HEQC’s decision of a possible longer time between

institutional reviews, or may indicate areas for development, improvement or enhancement.

While the QAF subscribes to a developmental approach to reviews, it also has a strong accountability function. The EQA system of the CHE has to continue to protect students and the public against low quality higher education provision. An institution that has received a negative institutional review report will, therefore, be provided by the HEQC with a specific timeframe within which to effect the improvements required to meet the standards by implementing a structured improvement plan. Depending on the scale of improvements needed and the timeline set, the institution may be required to submit periodic progress reports during the period for improvement.

Failure to complete the required improvements within the specified timeframes may trigger consequences, such as a review of the qualifications and programmes, an initiation of other reviews, or further investigations. In making its decision on a quality review, the HEQC may put the institution on notice to withdraw the accreditation of one or more qualifications, or prohibitions such as placing a moratorium on the submission of new qualifications for accreditation or further enrolments for one or more qualifications or programmes.

The HEQC's final decisions on the outcomes of reviews may form the basis of advice to the Minister of Higher Education and Training. Outcomes of reviews will feedback into the institutional quality track record, namely the institutional QA-dashboard, inform future EQA processes and contribute to knowledge generation on HE nationally.

Based on the findings of a review, the CHE will continue to provide support to HEIs through its quality promotion and capacity development function to develop, maintain and strengthen their internal quality management system.

#### **4.4 Qualification Accreditation**

The NQF Act 67 of 2008 (section 27, (h) (iv)) requires the CHE as the mandated QC responsible for the management of the HEQSF to recommend qualifications to SAQA

for their registration on the NQF and the recording of programmes against qualifications registered on the NQF. In accordance with this mandate, the CHE is shifting its unit of accreditation from the programme to the qualification level. The purpose of qualification accreditation is to confirm that qualifications on the HEQSF that are offered by HEIs meet the CHE's standards for higher education qualifications and the programmes leading up to these qualifications. Qualification accreditation is necessary to ensure public confidence in the quality and integrity of the qualifications offered by an institution in terms of national and international comparability.

#### ***4.4.1 Methodology for Qualification Accreditation***

Accreditation will apply to new and existing qualifications, and the approach below will apply to both public and private providers that demonstrate the capacity and capabilities to conduct their own qualification and programme approvals and reviews. In cases where an institution is very small or cannot demonstrate adequate capacity and/or capability to perform these functions, the CHE will continue to follow its current accreditation process of evaluating every programme and qualification.

##### ***4.4.1.1 Accreditation of new qualifications***

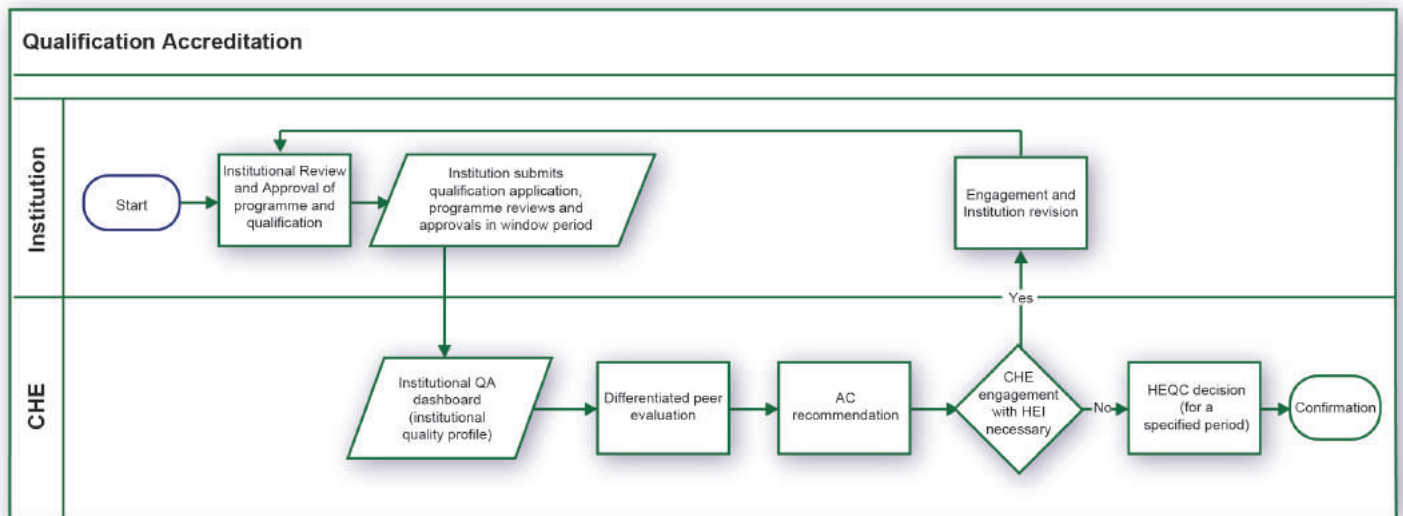
The CHE will, to a great extent, rely on the outcomes of peer reviews conducted by the institutions and the institutional approvals of new and existing programmes for accreditation and confirmation of the accreditation. This shift provides HEIs with greater responsibility and accountability for their programme approvals and reviews in the QAF. The CHE will closely monitor the reliability and credibility of the institution's IQA system for its qualification and programme approvals and reviews through a systematic moderation process. It is anticipated that HEIs that can demonstrate that they have a fully functional, rigorous and trustworthy IQA system for this responsibility over a period of time may ultimately require minimal moderation of their internal reviews and approval outcomes and that the maturity of their IQA systems for this purpose will be confirmed during any CHE review process.

The CHE acknowledges that continuous quality improvement and enhancement need to be institutionally driven through its integrated quality management system if they are to be effective. This shift to an institutional review and approval of programmes and qualifications, with the CHE moderating their quality, will also simplify the accreditation process and reduce the time required for accreditation, which was identified as an urgent need of the sector. The CHE will continue to employ a robust EQA process in its accreditation of qualifications based on the uploaded evidence of the design, approval, external peer evaluation, and review records of the programme/s provided by HEIs.

In line with its developmental approach, the CHE will streamline the qualification accreditation of new qualifications by creating window periods for HEIs to submit applications for the accreditation of new qualifications. Following peer evaluation of the applications, the CHE will engage with institutions on the quality of their total submissions in a year during a single CHE-HEI engagement, if necessary. This will provide institutions with one opportunity to address significant concerns and resubmit the applications within a specified short time, thus building capacity at an institutional level and enhancing the probability of positive HEQC decisions on the accreditation of the qualifications submitted. Positive accreditation outcomes strengthen an institution's quality track record, which would influence the time specified for the accreditation of its qualification accreditation cycle. If, however, the programme review conducted by the institution has critical weaknesses, the review will need to be redone.

The Qualification Accreditation process is represented below:

Table 4: Qualification Accreditation Process



The implementation of this shift will require the CHE to embark on an extensive and intensive quality promotion and capacity development drive to assist HEIs' efforts to have fully functional IQA systems and rigorous external peer-driven processes in place for the approval of new programmes and the cyclical review of their existing programmes by the time the QAF is implemented.

#### 4.4.1.2 Confirmation of Accreditation of existing qualifications

A significant change in the QAF is that the accreditation of qualifications will be for a fixed period. For the confirmation of accreditation of their qualifications, HEIs will need to upload evidence-based reports of their own programme and qualification reviews and the outcomes of the quality improvements planned, implemented and monitored to the HEQC online system. Based on the track record of an institution, as indicated on the QA-dashboard, a sample of its evidence-based reports for institutional programme reviews and continuous quality improvements will be evaluated. Such evaluations will be done by peer experts in the relevant discipline, and further documentary evidence or follow-up site visits may be required. The CHE will follow a risk-based approach and will focus on areas of concern based on the institution's QA-dashboard.

A differentiated approach will be used in that HEIs with good EQA track records will have their qualifications accredited for a longer period than those with EQA track



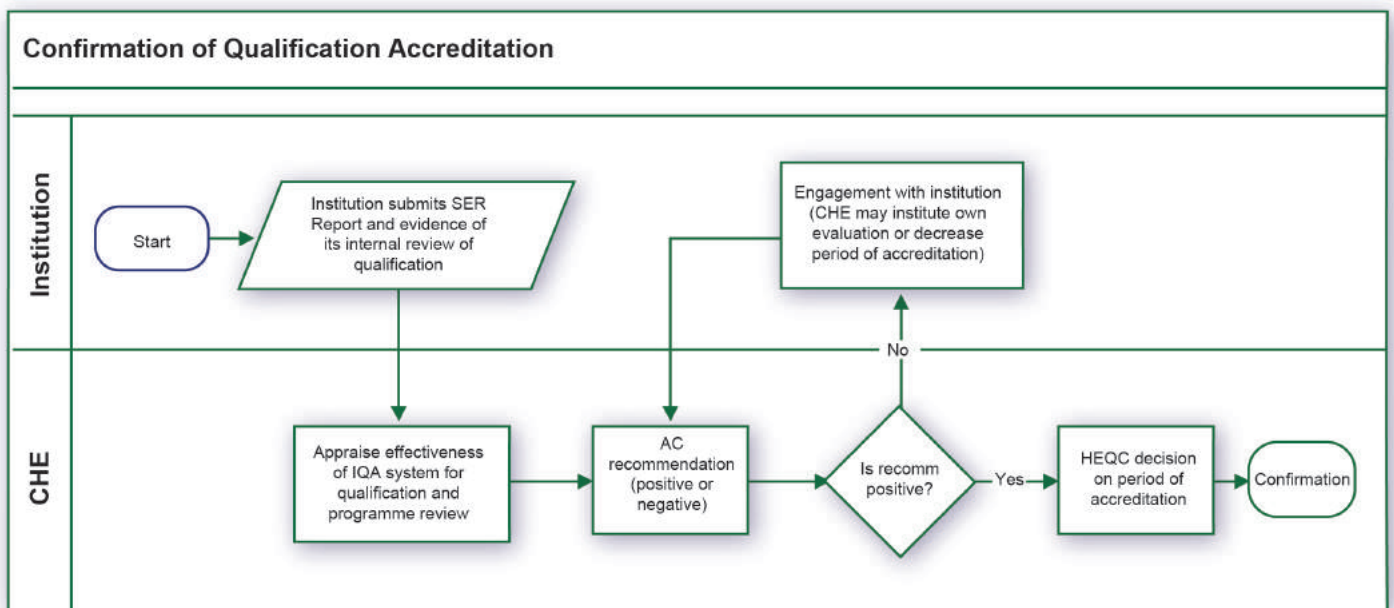
records that indicate major quality concerns. During any EQA review of the institution, such as an institutional or qualification review, the functionality of the IQA system for qualification and programme approval and review will be appraised, and the effectiveness of the quality management system for quality improvements will be examined and verified for purposes of confirmation of accreditation. This EQA information on the functionality of the institution's IQA system for programme approval and review will be considered during an institution's applications for an extension of the accreditation of its qualifications.

The feature of a fixed term for accreditation of qualifications depending on the maturity of the IQA system of the institution will enable the CHE to focus its attention and support on those institutions that are most in need of assistance. This allows for a flexible and agile approach to EQA management that enables the early identification of quality concerns and quicker response by the CHE to provide support and take firm, swift action in the case of continuing poor quality education provisioning where quality improvements have not been successfully implemented.

Discussions will be held with SAQA to explore the synchronisation dates for accreditation and registration of qualifications. Regular confirmation of accreditation of qualifications is important and will ensure an accurate record of an institution's qualifications on the HEQSF, NQF and National Learner Record Database (NLRD).

The Confirmation of Qualification Accreditation process is depicted in the diagram below.

Table 5: Confirmation of Qualification Accreditation Process



#### 4.4.2 Qualification Accreditation Outcomes

Once it has considered the recommendations of the peer evaluators and Accreditation Committee, the HEQC will make one of the following decisions regarding each qualification:

- i. Accredited
- ii. Accredited with improvements
- iii. Accredited with conditions (in exceptional circumstances)
- iv. Not accredited

Completion of the stipulated improvements will be verified during the confirmation of accreditation process or any of the other review processes undertaken by the CHE.

Confirmation of the accreditation of the qualifications of an institution and the HEQC's recommendation regarding their continued registration by SAQA for a specified period will be based on the outcomes of CHE reviews conducted, as indicated by the integrated analysis of the EQA information for the institution.

The outcome of a successful confirmation of accreditation process will be that the accreditation of an institution's qualifications will be confirmed for a further specified

period, which will depend on the rigour of the institution's IQA system for managing its own reviews and improvements. The outcome of an unsuccessful confirmation of accreditation process may have severe consequences for an institution, such as a suspension of further enrolments until improvements have been made, or the withdrawal of accreditation of qualifications.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The conceptualisation of the QAF was driven firstly by the CHE's self-evaluation of the improvement in the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of its own EQA functioning as the Quality Council for higher education. Given its mandate to manage the HEQSF, the CHE intends to increase its potential impact on the development of the quality of higher education at a systemic level within a dynamically changing current and future HE context.

The QAF recognises that institutions should develop appropriate approaches to social impact, social justice and changes in their cultures, which must be supported by appropriate plans, policies, structures and processes (fitness for purpose). Concomitantly, the QAF upholds the accountability of institutions to develop approaches that are relevant to the national planning and policy environment, and to the continuing challenges that the higher education sector faces (fitness of purpose).

The CHE has a role to play in advancing the broad transformation imperatives of the South African higher education system. It has chosen to do so in the QAF by focusing on the quality of learning and teaching, and the assessment of HEIs and all related functions and operations. The assumption is that by improving the quality of the provisioning for learning and teaching, such as the pedagogical, epistemological and ontological issues related to the curriculum, the quality of the graduates and the quality of their learning experiences will also improve.

The QAF seeks to strike an appropriate balance between accountability and quality development, with the focus on the adoption of a dynamic, evidence-based,

developmental approach to support quality maturity in all institutions. The QAF relates quality maturity specifically to the integrity and effectiveness of the IQA system that each HEI develops to support its academic project, which includes its contribution to the discovery, construction, dissemination and use of knowledge within a differentiated HE system. The design and implementation of the CHE's EQA systems, namely Standards Development, Quality Promotion and Capacity Development, Accreditation, and Quality Reviews function jointly with the QAF.

Following the publication of the QAF by the HEQC, the CHE will enter into a transitional period during which there will be an intensive programme of quality promotion and capacity development with HEIs on the principles, processes and new practices of the QAF. During this period, the CHE will develop a range of national standards and guidelines, as well as an ICT infrastructure to support its EQA functions. It will also strengthen its collaboration with the DHET and SAQA for a single shared online application and registration process, and with professional bodies with which it has a signed memorandum of agreement. The CHE will announce the final implementation date for the QAF at a later date.

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## **ANNEXURE A**

### **An ICT-supported architecture**

Technological advancements have created new opportunities for the CHE to improve the quality, effectiveness and efficiency of its EQA functions. Shared online platforms, data warehousing and data analytics will be used in innovative ways, for example by supporting collaboration between the regulatory bodies. An innovation that will play a significant role in the QAF for the various EQA functions will be the Quality Assurance dashboards (QA-dashboards).

An institution's QA-dashboard is an integrated analysis of its QA track record based on the HEQC's decisions on Reviews, Accreditation and other available information, such as the performance indicators on HEMIS and HEQCIS, the outcomes of special audits, the investigation of complaints, quality promotion and capacity development initiatives, and interventions. The QA-dashboard contains both quantitative and qualitative data for a variety of indicators and will provide the rationale for the differentiated way in which the CHE will approach an institution. The QA-dashboard for each institution will be made available to that particular institution to authenticate the information. The QA-dashboard will benefit institutions in that they will not have to repeatedly submit the same information.

The information on the QA-dashboards (such as VitalStats) will be the official source of information on the qualifications offered on the HEQSF and will be a valuable data source for research by the CHE. The CHE will manage the collection, analysis and dissemination of information on the QA-dashboards, which will provide data for research and advice to the Minister of Higher Education and Training.

The institutional QA-dashboards will assist the CHE with managing its EQA processes in a differentiated way, when various aspects of the identity of an institution (e.g. private / public, comprehensive / UoT, urban / rural, contact / distance) are considered. The QA-dashboards are also intended to streamline and simplify the current manual sourcing and collating of relevant information by the CHE from both external agencies



such as the DHET and SAQA, and internally between the various current directorates. The quality-management performance of the HEIs over a period of time in the various EQA functions and information from the DHET, SAQA and professional bodies could provide input to the QA-dashboard. The comprehensive integrated holistic quality perspective of an institution, as reflected by the data on its dashboard, will form the basis of the differentiated approach by the CHE in its engagement with the institution.

