



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**INSTITUTIONAL AUDIT REPORT
ON THE
UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE**

(8 February 2024)

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Acronyms

ACS	Academic Committee of Senate
A-STEP	Academic Student Tutorial and Excellence Programme
APDC	Academic Planning and Development Committee (of Senate)
BUSSE	Beginning University Survey of Student Engagement
CHE	Council on Higher Education
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019 caused by SARS-CoV-2 (2019-nCoV)
CLASSE	Classroom Survey of Student Engagement
CTL	Centre for Teaching and Learning
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
DIRAP	Directorate Institutional Research and Academic Planning
ERT	Emergency Remote Teaching
EXCO	Executive Committee
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HEQC	Higher Education Quality Committee
HEQSF	Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework
HEMIS	Higher Education Management Information System
HR	Human Resources
IA	Institutional Audit
IARP	Institutional Audit as Reflexive Praxis
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IF	Institutional Forum
IQMF	Integrated Quality Management Framework
IQMS	Integrated Quality Management System
IT	Information Technology
ITP	Integrated Transformation Plan
KPA	Key Performance Area
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
LCM	Learner Case Management
LSSE	Lecturer Survey of Student Engagement - LSSE
LMS	Learning Management System
LTS	Learning and Teaching Strategy
MIT-D	Multi-inter-transdisciplinary study
NDP	National Development Plan

NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NPPSET	National Plan for Post-School Education and Training
NQF	National Qualification Framework
NRF	National Research Foundation
NSFAS	National Student Financial Aid Scheme
PM	Performance Management
PMS	Performance Management System
POPIA	Protection of Personal Information Act (POPI Act)
PoE	Portfolio of Evidence
PQM	Programme and Qualification Mix
QA	Quality Assurance
QAF	Quality Assurance Framework of 2024
QEP	Quality Enhancement Project
QM	Quality Management
QMS	Quality Management System
QC	Quality Council
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
SAQA	South African Qualification Authority
SASSE	South African Survey of Student Engagement
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SEMC	Senate Enrolment Management Committee
SETA	Sector Education and Training Authority
SER	Self-Evaluation Report
SLP	Short Learning Programmes
SRC	Student Representative Council
T&L	Teaching and Learning
TLM	Teaching and Learning Manager
TLMG	Teaching and Learning Management Group
UFS	University of the Free State
UFSSP	UFS Strategic Plan: 2018-2022
USAf	Universities South Africa
UIC&SJ	Unit for Institutional Change and Social Justice
V&SG	Vision and strategic goals of the University of the Free State
VC	Vice Chancellor
VPN	Virtual Private Network
WIL	Workplace Integrated Learning

Executive Summary

The Council on Higher Education (CHE) was established through the Higher Education Act (No. 101 of 1997, as amended) primarily to assure quality in the South African higher education sector and to advise the Minister on aspects of higher education. The National Qualifications Framework Act (No. 67 of 2008, as amended) conferred additional responsibilities on the CHE as the Quality Council for higher education, with overall responsibility for the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF). The CHE executes its quality assurance responsibilities through its permanent committee, the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC). The CHE, through the HEQC, exercises its quality assurance function using a variety of mechanisms, one of which is institutional audits that are mandated by the Higher Education Act.

The *Framework for Institutional Audits (2021)*¹ and its attendant *Manual for Institutional Audits (2021)*² are key instruments to regulate the implementation of institutional audits. These documents are also aligned in important respects to the new Quality Assurance Framework (QAF)³ that was approved by the HEQC and Council in September 2020, and which will be implemented in the medium term by the CHE. Institutional audits are strongly influenced by both the specific context within which each HEI works and by the national transformational agenda within which higher education functions. The HEQC has identified a need to do full audits of all HEIs in South Africa. A full audit of an institution determines whether or not, and to what extent, an institution's IQA systems, policies, and procedures ensure the effective provisioning of good quality higher education that enhances the likelihood of student success through quality learning and teaching, research opportunities, and integrated community engagement. The emphasis is less on ensuring that required standards are met at a particular threshold than on the deliberate, continuous, systematic, and measurable improvement of the student experience, as well as on building reflexive praxis to develop quality cultures in institutions.

The following principles guided the institutional audit of the University of Free State:

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

¹ <https://www.che.ac.za/publications/frameworks/framework-institutional-audits-2021>

² <https://www.che.ac.za/publications/frameworks/manual-institutional-audits-2021>

³ <https://www.che.ac.za/publications/frameworks/quality-assurance-framework-qaf-higher-education-south-africa>

2. The uniqueness of each institution's size, shape, location, context and mission is recognised.
3. The value of institutional audits rests on the compilation of credible, contextually relevant and reliable information that is required for internal quality-related planning and self-evaluation, peer review and public reporting (for example, by publishing executive summaries).
4. Student experience, student engagement and participation and the student voice are central to an evaluation of an institution's quality management system.
5. The institutional audit is a peer-driven and evidence-based process to ensure that the HEQC and its audit panel reports are transparent, informed and consistent.
6. Institutional audits are developmental and intent on supporting continuous quality improvement and enhancement.
7. Institutional audits are required to balance their developmental character with the regulatory requirement that the CHE and the HEQC act on poor provisioning where institutions have no clear commitments, processes, practices or plans to improve.
8. Institutional audits are a key component of the HEQC's broad-based quality assurance mandate.

Aligned to international practice, the HEQC uses a review methodology consisting of an institutional self-evaluation report (SER), and an external peer review which verifies, triangulates, and validates the institution's self-evaluation. The external peer review consists of a document analysis of the SER and institutional portfolio of evidence, as well as a site visit at which interviews are conducted with constituencies and physical infrastructure is visited. This audit report forms the outcome of the institutional audit of the University of Free State.

The University of the Free State (UFS) was established in 1904 as Grey College School with six students; gazetted in 1950 as the University of the Orange Free State and renamed in 2001 as the UFS with an enrolment of more than 30,000 students. This university has three campuses: the Bloemfontein Campus, the QwaQwa Campus, and the South Campus. It has, therefore, both urban and rural components; the urban members being the Bloemfontein and South Campuses, and the rural ones being the QwaQwa Campus.

The UFS sees itself as a research-led, student-centered, and regionally engaged university that contributes to the development and social justice through the production of globally competitive graduates and knowledge (UFS SER, 2022, p. 35).

This university has seven faculties with 41 teaching locations, 127 academic departments, 366 contact programmes and 25 distance mode programmes. The Programme and Qualification Mix

(PQM) includes Higher Certificates, Advanced Certificates, Diplomas, Advanced Diplomas, Postgraduate Certificates, Bachelors, Postgraduate Diplomas, Honours, Masters and Doctoral degrees. This is a traditional university as approximately 90% of these offerings are in Bachelors, Postgraduate Diplomas, Honours, Masters and Doctoral degrees.

The following summary captures the institutional audit panel's commendations and recommendations for the University of Free State.

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

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

Standard 1

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

The University of the Free State (UFS) seeks to distinguish itself 'through academic excellence, diversity, and inclusivity and innovative and transformative thought' whilst pursuing 'the delivery of excellent quality graduates and knowledge for the region, the continent, and the globe' (UFS Strategic Plan (UFSSP), 2018-2022, p. i). The UFS has a clearly stated vision and strategic goals (hereinafter referred to as V&SG). The motto of UFS is 'In Veritate Sapientiae Lux' (In Truth is the Light of Wisdom). The UFS does not and has chosen not to have a mission statement in the strategic planning framework ending in 2022. To the UFS, its vision, motto, and goals, as a high-level integrated philosophy, are not seen as stand-alone components but as an integral part of the university's core functions. Moreover, the UFS sees itself as a research-led, student-centered, and regionally engaged university that contributes to the development and social justice through the production of globally competitive graduates and knowledge (UFSSP, 2018-2022, p. 1)

Standard 2

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

The stated vision and strategic goals of the UFS generally align with national priorities and the South African context, where transformation features prominently. The UFS Self Evaluation Report (2022) and the Narrative Toolkit (2021) reflect that the identity and position of UFS are changing. Respondents indicate that transformation is a work in progress. The UFS is a historically white university, but there has been an unprecedented change in student demographics. The university has enrolled its largest African intake in the institution's history. Some respondents regard this change in student demographics as a risk of losing racial diversity. The UFS actioned its vision of contributing to social justice and several of its strategic goals when it abandoned separate classes for white and black students based on whether the medium of instruction was Afrikaans or English.

The stated vision and strategic goals of the UFS generally align with some sectoral, regional, continental, and global imperatives. Some new learning and teaching strategies include modules that engage with the *United Nations Sustainable Development Goals*. The *UFS Transformation and Social Justice Report (2020)* provides documentary evidence that the work of the Unit for Institutional Change and Social Justice, created in 2019, is the implementation tool of the *UFS Strategic Plan (2018)*. That unit promotes an institutional culture of human dignity, aligned with principles of social justice, social cohesion, social capital, and social inclusion – all of which are local, national, continental, and global imperatives. The institutional audit (IA) panel notes that transformation is an ongoing process and that change, and transformation are neither simple nor axiomatic. The IA panel further notes that the historical trajectory of the UFS depicts an institution in a state of ongoing change and transformation that mirrors the changing context in which it operates.

The UFS developed an Integrated Transformation Plan (ITP), which notes that transformation in South Africa implies the dismantling of the legacy of colonialism and apartheid at political, social economic, and intellectual levels to adopt new practices, modes of organisation, and values capable of delivering social justice. The ITP was built on several previous reports, namely the

Transformation Report of 2004 to 2014, the Soudien Report of 2008, the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) Report, and the Shimla Park Report of 2016. The ITP Framework was approved by the Council at its March 2017 meeting. The Revised Integrated Transformation Plan reflects changes in the deliverables in line with contextual and operational demands. Simultaneously, the *Research and Narrative Building Report: Visibility and Reputation* of the UFS (2020, p. 30) indicates a recurring theme from staff who find the identity of UFS ambiguous, stemming in part from the lack of measurement of transformation and the absence of clarity as to when transformation would be completed. Hence, staff must realise that transformation is an ongoing process.

Recommendation

1. UFS must ensure that the definition of transformation is meaningfully unpacked for the understanding and buy-in of all stakeholders especially at all staff levels and by students. UFS should also design and apply methods of measuring transformation within the context of its accepted definition of transformation whilst clarifying to staff and students that transformation is an ongoing process, which cannot be assigned a time frame for completion.

Standard 3

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

The UFS designed and developed an *Integrated Quality Management Framework (IQMF)*, which became effective in November 2021. The IQMF is regarded as the integrated quality management system (IQMS) and unpacks its planning documents and instruments, such as the operational and annual performance plans and various strategies that govern and manage the core academic functions. However, the IQMF is both recent in origin and has only been recently applied. There were divergent views from stakeholders on the extent to which the IQMF supports the core academic functions across all three campuses and the varied delivery modes. Some respondents were unaware of the IQMF, and some could not recall the nature of the Quality Management System before the introduction of the IQMF. Hence, although the IQMF (2021) is operational, its coherence and integration throughout the institution are not yet evident. The ITP of the UFS intends to establish parity and equity across the different campuses through different work streams with deliverables serving the University's consulted plan.

Although the SER (2022) claims that there was wide consultation during its development, not all staff were familiar with its contents. Students felt that their voices were silenced even though they may be represented on governance committees. They do not believe that their voices are heard by the university in a meaningful way.

The strategic goals refer to the word 'quality' and the IQMF (2021) refers to the vision and strategic goals. The *UFS Strategic Plan (2018)* articulates the goals of the university, but it does not state the relationship between the strategic goals and the university's IQMF (which is the QMS). In other words, the IQMF was initiated *after* the development of the UFS Strategic Plan. There is contradictory evidence regarding the various sites' governance, management, resources, and programme- and module offerings. At the same time, however, the IQMF places the UFS in good stead with the onset of the Quality Assurance Framework of 2024. Aligning the IQMF with the UFS vision and strategic goals and aligning the governance and management processes with it is thus a work in progress. A new Strategic Plan for 2023 to 2028 should state the relationship between the vision, strategic goals, and the university's IQMF.

Recommendations

2. UFS is encouraged, in its next Strategic Plan 2023 to 2028, to highlight the relationship between the vision, strategic goals, and the University's recently formulated IQMF. At that time, a consultation and communication plan should be devised which reports on the new strategic planning process in which these relations are clarified.
3. UFS is encouraged to discover why students do not believe that their voices are heard and incorporated where appropriate in an effort to bridge gaps.
4. UFS should obtain wider buy-in regarding the deliverables to establish parity and equity across different campuses as defined within the ITP.

Standard 4

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

In response to Standard 4, the SER (2022) defines the institutional powers of governance-, management- and leadership structures. It then restates various aspects of the *CHE Manual for Institutional Audits (2021)* guidelines and provides lists to help the reader understand the different roles and responsibilities of the governance structures, management, and academic leadership. The SER (2022) highlights the various standing sub-committees of the Council and Senate and

the joint committees of the Council and Senate. There appears to be a clear understanding of the different roles and responsibilities of the governance structures, management and academic leadership portfolios, and the individuals who serve in the relevant roles.

The UFS takes an all-encompassing, ongoing, and integrated approach to transforming institutional culture. This is achieved through various strategies and interventions that translate into policies and procedures with the aim of achieving behavioural change. However, the interviewees' divergent responses regarding the experience of institutional culture suggest the need for enhanced engagement to ensure a common understanding of the institutional culture.

Recommendation

5. UFS must develop a reflective and consulted plan on how to further enhance the institutional culture of the UFS, with an evaluation of the implementation of this plan.

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

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

Standard 5

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

- (i) *governance arrangements*
- (ii) *policies*
- (iii) *processes, procedures and plans*
- (iv) *instructional products*
- (v) *measurement of impact*
- (vi) *data management and utilization as these give effect to the delivery of the HEI's core functions.*

The UFS governance structures are in place, with clear responsibilities and reporting lines for each committee. While the institution is applauded for the effort to ensure the representation of all groups in committees, it emerged during interviews that some academics felt their voices were not heard (especially in the Senate). Similarly, students also felt their presence on committees was more of a token than an opportunity to contribute to the quality of teaching and learning.

To manage the quality of the delivery of core functions, the institution has well-developed policies, procedures and plans, duly approved across all levels up to the Council. These policies and procedures are brought together to support quality management processes through the new *Integrated Quality Management Framework (IQMF) (2021)*. However, the implementation process demonstrates that some policies are working well; some require alignment between intentions and practice, and others require extensive review.

The *Performance Management System (PMS)* as a quality management tool is an example of an ineffective policy as there is no alignment currently between policy intentions and practice. At UFS, performance management intends to balance accountability and the further development of staff in their respective roles. However, the implementation process, especially as experienced by academics, is perceived as bureaucratic and lacks focus on supporting professional development and quality enhancement.

In many ways, the institution does have systems to support the quality of teaching and learning at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, but there is room for improvement. The teaching and learning process starts with onboarding students, and at UFS, this step is marred with challenges from recruitment to registration, leading to over-enrolment in some programmes. Other areas of concern are linked to registration, which affects student experience of academic advising and the academic appeals processes.

While the enrolment process has challenges, the institution has effective systems to engage students, monitor performance, and provide support through to graduation – the ‘UFS student walk.’ The work done by Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) staff and Faculty Advisors in student support and development is extensive and applauded by both staff and students. Another area in which the institution is doing well is Engaged Scholarship. Both staff and students do extensive work in ways that benefit scholarship, community development, and student success. The quantity and quality of community engagement activities and their impact on the societies surrounding the three campuses, regions, and nations are impressive. The UFS could do more to highlight this work.

Commendation

- a. UFS is commended for going out of its way to make the Engaged Scholarship compulsory for all academics. Engaged Scholarship is well-conceptualised at this university. Both students and staff are involved in both intra- and extra-curricular engagements with the community. Student engagement in co-curricular activities supports the notion of well-rounded student success. Through the activities, students develop a good sense of what it means to be a citizen and how to engage responsibly. Strategic partnerships are formed across all three campuses to benefit the university and community, thus satisfying the scholarship and development components, which are critical to the well-being of the university and the community.

Recommendations

7. UFS should urgently address students' ability to participate constructively in committees, and also ensure that the various committees create a responsive atmosphere where students feel valued and encouraged to contribute, as part of existing leadership programmes. There should be opportunities for students to provide feedback on their experiences
8. UFS should review its recruitment and admissions processes, from recruitment to making offers in respective programmes, as a matter of urgency. This should include paying attention to the use of data (historical and real-time data) and communication processes across all stakeholders in the enrolment process, especially faculties, to support the management of placements. See also Recommendation 12 in relation to the dissemination of data.
9. UFS Faculty Examination Boards should monitor academic appeals processes and timeously address delays to avoid impacting students' registration timelines for the following academic year.

Standard 6

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

Although the institution has a resource allocation model to distribute its finances, the reality is that the financial resources seem to be overwhelmed by the growing institutional plans (e.g., digitalisation) and the needs of current programmes, especially in response to the increasing student numbers versus staff complement. In its SER (2022), the institution acknowledges human and systems-related capacity challenges. In many instances, the distribution of resources is experienced as problematic and impacts the performance of staff, especially academics. While this concern seems to be across the board, it is experienced more acutely in some programmes than in others (and especially in QwaQwa).

The services provided by Information and Communications Technology (ICT), the research labs, and the learning spaces are appropriate to the nature and size of the institution, and they facilitate quality management. There is adequate provisioning of a stable and secured infrastructure that supports the academic project in all the core areas (teaching, research, engaged scholarship, and administration). The current provision of ICT services may seem appropriate, but the institution's digitalisation plan and increasing student enrolment demands might cause disruption. Further, the student's experiences with access to data require attention to ensure equitable participation in online teaching and learning. The resource demands of implementing a digitalisation plan, growing student numbers, and the need for access to data for online learning require that the institution monitor how ICT could support quality services.

There is evidence of the institution's effort to provide state-of-the-art labs and equipment to support niche research areas, which also benefits postgraduate students. In addition, the overall progressive design of learning facilities to provide more space for teaching encourages a culture of learning in and outside of class time and demonstrates responsiveness to the needs of day students. The UFS is applauded for its impressive facilities across all campuses, with full acknowledgment that the work in South and QwaQwa Campuses is in progress.

There was consensus among the academic staff that they are well supported in their role as teachers in higher education. Apart from the usual teaching and learning workshops, the CTL has taken advantage of its extensive capacity for data analytics to support academic responsiveness to student engagement data and module evaluations and to facilitate conversations on improvements in the different modules. Working closely with the Directorate of Institutional Research and Academic Planning (DIRAP), the CTL significantly contributes to implementing institutional and faculty plans in curriculum renewal and quality module design and delivery. In addition, CTL collaborates with Human Resources to provide staff with a holistic professional development experience.

There is a new policy to support the quality management of short learning programmes (SLPs). During the interviews, there was a sense that the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) process is lengthy due to quality assurance processes.

Commendations

- b. UFS is commended for the work done by CTL in professionalising staff, and their academic role in generating data for evidence-based decision-making. The Centre also supports student learning. Both staff and students expressed this appreciation. The Centre has demonstrated expertise in working with data to support the academic project within the UFS and HE in the country. Furthermore, the Centre has strategic collaborations (e.g., DIRAP, HR, and Faculties) and ways of engagement that facilitate effectiveness in driving academic staff development activities and student academic development. Notable is the efficient way in which data is used to monitor student engagement and performance; to facilitate early identification of students likely to face academic exclusion and to communicate and follow-up with students via SMS, as well as provide guidance towards relevant support activities. In addition, CTL's work in student engagement and data analytics is acknowledged both within the UFS community and the higher education sector in the country.
- c. UFS's effort to provide academic programmes and research facilities is a further commendation. New building infrastructure foregrounds a drive to create learning spaces for use in and out of class time for both individual and collaborative learning opportunities. Of note is the effort to put in place facilities to support a holistic experience for all students on the respective campuses in line with the ideals of the Integrated Transformation Plan (ITP). This fully acknowledges that work on the QwaQwa campus is in progress.

Recommendations

- 10. UFS should urgently find a resource allocation model that supports all programmes across the campuses equitably. The current uneven workloads are not sustainable, and the approach to 'do more with less' compromises the quality of work done. A new resource allocation model should be in place within 12 months of receipt of this report.
- 11. UFS should monitor the processing of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) applications and promptly manage any delays in a manner that optimises the efficiency of handling these applications while maintaining standards.

Standard 7

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

The university systems collect, manage, and archive institutional data in a secure environment. Systems are decentralised across the three campuses and monitored at all times. Systems are protected to ensure that access to the data is monitored in line with the POPIA legislation. Different systems collect and analyse various data sets, demonstrating the institution's commitment to staff and student experience in line with the Integrated Transformation Plan (ITP) goals. There is expertise across DIRAP and CTL to analyse the data. However, the dissemination and use of the data is not consistent across the board, sometimes done effectively (e.g., monitoring and tracking student performance), and at times not (e.g., student enrolment process). The institution has the capacity for data analytics but needs to monitor how the data is used consistently to inform decisions taken to improve the quality of the academic project.

Recommendation

11. UFS should revise its procedures for disseminating data timeously to identified audiences and further evaluate how data is used to inform decision-making processes, especially in student enrolment. The UFS has a good set of systems, processes, and human capital to enable efficient collection and analysis of qualitative and quantitative data. However, there were instances where the data was not efficiently disseminated and/or used to inform the decision-making processes, as discussed under Standard 5, in Recommendation 8, in relation to the enrolment processes.

Standard 8

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

While acknowledging the inconsistency in the use of data, highlighted in standard 7, the institution has systems to collect data and benefits from available expertise (both in DIRAP and CTL) in data analytics to support decision-making. This area is also acknowledged by the higher education sector in the country (through the work done by CTL). During the period of disruption,

different types of institutional data were efficiently used to plan for the provision, support, and monitoring of engagement for both staff and students.

Commendation

- d. UFS is commended for its systems, processes, and expertise to work with data in a way that informs quality management procedures, as reflected in work done by DIRAP and CTL. Of note is the expertise developed to work with data analytics to benefit the institution and the country's higher education sector. In addition to the student engagement surveys, especially during times of disruption, this expertise helped the institution to monitor engagement and to support the provision of interventions. Through the work of CTL staff, the LMS was used efficiently to support the institution in its efforts to monitor student engagement. This move supported the drive to ensure that no student was left behind. As a result, the work received international acknowledgment as an example of good practice in this area.

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

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

Standard 9

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

The UFS had the foresight to revisit and update all relevant quality concepts related to the student lifecycle due to the *Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning* (ERT) demands brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic, and changes in regulatory frameworks. This new system has been well received in the main, and its implementation is seen as a positive step in the *Integrated Quality Management Framework* (IQMF). It is not, however, without teething problems, and more time is needed before the system can be described as fully mature. Challenges are still experienced with the offers made to students, their placement, and the registration process.

The UFS has in place an approved PMS, which has recently undergone a complete review and update in 2019. Quality management is embedded in the PMS of both the academic and support staff. The evidence presented in the SER and PoE (as well as by senior management) indicates that a comprehensive and inclusionary process was followed in the development of the PMS. However, the panel found differences in the narratives presented by management and those of the academic staff. Although management believes the PMS is well accepted, many academic staff have observed concerns. There does not seem to be a complete buy-in from the academic staff, who explained that the heavy workload imposed on them, mainly through student over-enrolment, creates difficulty in achieving their targets. Participants indicated that research and engaged scholarship suffer due to the growth in student numbers, which has not been matched by an increase in staff numbers. Academic staff said that this situation negatively affects their prospects for promotion. Some senior staff members stated that they were able to improve their research output during the last 2 years, but others mentioned that younger and more junior staff members experienced greater stress and more administration, which had a negative effect on their research outputs. There were repeated comments by various participants that the Teaching and Learning (T&L) load, due to high staff-student ratios, puts academic staff under pressure to achieve their required performance level scores. This was summed up by a staff member who stated that many staff are in survival mode, and the impact is felt mostly on their research capacity. This stress is exacerbated by the PMS structure that uses metrics to assess staff performance across the three pillars of T&L, research, and engaged scholarship.

The panel observed that staff and students perceive the CTL as a cohesive structure that creates a harmonious relationship between the institution's various quality structures. This could be attributed to the joint operation of the CTL, particularly the horizontal management style. The CTL appears to be the glue that holds the institution's quality assurance mechanism in place, and as such, it deserves praise.

As mentioned, the IQMF is still a work in its infancy. It is sound and well-integrated but needs to address the issues that will enable it to close the feedback loop. This report draws attention to those areas of concern, which include the involvement of all stakeholders, a tendency for departments still to work in silos, and the challenges with the workload allocation system.

Recommendations

12. UFS should establish a stronger integration between communication, marketing, and finalisation of the prospectus to prevent unnecessary issues with registration. All changes

to the prospectus need to be timeously and effectively communicated among all parties to ensure a seamless registration process. This process should be implemented urgently and be in place before the next recruitment cycle.

13. UFS should amend its PMS needs to consider the distinctive nature of academic scholarship that allows academic staff to build their T&L, research, and progressively engaged scholarship functions. A plan to consult academics for revising the PMS should be developed within 6 months of acceptance of this report. The PMS requires deeper buy-in from the academic staff, who sometimes feel powerless to communicate their concerns with the system of metrics being used to assess their performance. It is recommended that a discussion with academic staff be held as soon as possible so that they can express their reservations about having their scholarly development measured using tick-box criteria, that an alternative, mutually acceptable performance assessment process be developed, and that necessary amendments are made that are mutually acceptable to the performance assessment process. Standard 10

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

The panel noted that UFS has developed an IQMF that includes monitoring and evaluation of the quality of its core functions and operations across all spheres. However, although quality-related functions are built into the PMS, it was unclear to the panel whether staff members understand the important role that quality management plays in the future sustainability of the institution. This is evidenced by the observation that during the COVID-19 pandemic period when alternative assessment processes were employed, there was an unusually high increase in pass rates from some faculties. Despite repeated questioning, the panel did not receive a reasonable explanation from the institution. The report addresses this in greater detail and makes recommendations in Focus Area 4.

Quality management processes are included at all levels in the institution, but the panel found that many stakeholders indicated that they were not consulted and did not contribute to the SER (2022). Staff members appreciate the reward systems that the university has put in place to recognise excellent work. The annual T&L conference, which the CTL hosts, allows staff to showcase their innovation practices. Staff can enter for excellence in learning and teaching awards in any of the following innovation categories: assessment, curriculum enhancement and transformation, technology-enhanced learning, student engagement, teaching and learning, and

various other categories. However, most respondents indicated that a reduction in workload would be welcomed rather than just the prestige that accompanies such awards.

Non-compliance with the quality assurance system seems to be addressed through a lens of care and not from a punitive stance, and legal procedures are only initiated as a last resort. However, no examples were provided to substantiate this position, and very little evidence was provided in the SER (2022).

Standard 11

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

The SER (2022) states that a reasonable allocation of the annual budget is set aside for quality improvement, and this was confirmed by the various stakeholders at the university. The university states that quality improvement is enacted by ensuring that the academic workload is equitable and student-staff ratios are balanced so that sufficient time is allocated to staff to carry out their responsibilities related to T&L, research, and engaged scholarship. Many respondents, on the other hand, indicated that the workload was unmanageable and unsustainable, contrary to the SER's findings (2022). A high workload could ultimately compromise the quality of T&L, research and engaged scholarship, and/or staff well-being. The SER (2022, p. 26) states that the norm for the staff-student ratio at contact universities is 1:30. In 2021, the staff-student ratio is reported as 1:36.6. This differs for different faculties. An example of a very high staff-student ratio is 1:108.4 in Education and 1:71.8 in Law. Understandably, this ratio will be much lower in health sciences, where it is reported a 1:8.9. An anomaly would seem to be the faculty of theology, where the ratio is a low 1:16.2.

A repeated observation was that the workload allocation model does not take note of the input necessary from the academic staff. Many academic staff members expressed concern that they are excluded from this process. In addition, to address the workload issue, use is made of temporary staff, particularly for marking, and concerns were expressed that this practice could affect quality management issues. The workload allocation model has a knock-on effect in many quality assurances and management areas. Most of these have been reported elsewhere in this document, particularly in the discussions on performance management, budget allocation, and staff wellness.

There has been a marked increase in the number of students at the university without commensurate growth in staff members. This has led to a very high student-staff ratio, way above reasonable numbers in some faculties. In addition, due to the move to Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) during the COVID-19 pandemic, academic staff needed to move their T&L to the online platform. This increase in their already heavy workload took time away from their research and engaged scholarship activities.

UFS carries out extensive surveys among their staff with respect to staff wellness, staff satisfaction as well as staff engagement. They refer to the support systems that are in place for assisting staff with mental and emotional issues. However, from the interviews with the staff, the panel found many felt that their well-being was being compromised due to their heavy workload demands.

Recommendations

14. UFS should complete the review of the workload model that is currently being undertaken, within 6 months of acceptance of this report, with an evaluation of the workload model within 12 months. This undertaking will support a process for establishing sustainable workloads for academic staff, which will, in turn, facilitate their buy-in to the PMS. Further to this, attending to the review process will alleviate the high workload that impacts the overall performance of academic staff.
15. UFS should conduct an institutional review of its staff wellness programmes, with specific emphasis on the effects of the high workload experienced by academic staff, as a matter of urgency, to assess the impact of the workload stresses experienced by the academic staff. Notwithstanding the staff wellness, satisfaction, and engagement surveys that are well established, this review process should include recommendations for addressing any wellness challenges that the staff are encountering. A report on the implementation of this recommendation should be completed as soon as possible.

Standard 12

The quality assurance system achieves its purpose efficiently and effectively.

The SER (2022) refers to the fact that the Quality Assurance (QA) system has been equitably infused as part of the working culture over all three campuses. However, the panel observed that additional support services were required at the South and QwaQwa Campuses, particularly given the intense student support structures needed on these two campuses. It is noted that

many of the infrastructure challenges faced by the QwaQwa campus are out of the direct control of the university, e.g., electricity supply and a stable internet connection, and will need innovative resources to provide the level of quality support that is required. There is an additional challenge in recruiting and retaining staff due to the remote location of the QwaQwa campus.

All university stakeholders must take ownership of the quality management system, which requires a collaborative culture. This requires participation which includes all the voices. Despite being on an upward trajectory, critical self-reflection and the unbundling of an established resistance to change need to become more prominent in the university's institutional culture. This recommendation is made under Focus Area 1, Standard 4.

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

The four standards in Focus Area 4 concentrate on how effectively the institutional quality management system enhances the likelihood of student success, improves learning and teaching and supports the scholarship of learning and teaching. These standards drill down in greater detail in Focus Area 2.

Standard 13

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

There is an appropriate system for programme design, development, approval, and review at the UFS. This includes in-depth guidance, steered by the 'Guidelines for the Approval, Registration, Accreditation, and Recording of Qualifications,' from the conceptualisation of a new programme to its offering. However, the implementation of these guidelines has some challenges. The link to the Marketing and Communications Unit seems to be the system's weakness. This is a serious concern, as it impacts the entire recruitment and admissions process at UFS. Incidents of students admitted into qualifications that no longer exist were relayed, suggesting a lack of coherence and integration in the institutional Quality Management System (QMS). Issues around the planning and management of the entire recruitment, admissions, and registration process contribute to the over-enrolment in some programmes, thus affecting the size and shape of the university. This negatively impacts the workload of teaching staff and can affect the quality of

teaching and learning. The primary issue appears to be a disconnect between the processes of the Senate Enrolment Management Committee (SEMC) and the experiences of teaching staff within courses and programmes.

The UFS managed the transition from traditional contact teaching to a low-tech and low-data online solution reasonably. It should be noted that most students and teaching staff were complimentary and positive regarding the university's response to the Covid-19 teaching constraints and lockdown, with the "No student left behind" philosophy recognised as key. Many UFS students appear to come from families with limited means, and the university did not have the funding to implement all its planned interventions. This was probably exacerbated by the rural nature of many students' homes. The university data solution (Global Protect) was not popular with students.

One concern identified by the panel was the increase – by more than 10% – in pass rates from 2019 to 2020 in the Faculties of Law, Humanities, Theology, and Religion, despite the obvious constraints. The Quality Assurance aspect of this increase in pass rates did not appear to have been investigated.

Recommendations

16. UFS should expand the QA of the assessment processes beyond the current focus on courses with high failure rates and at-risk modules to include courses with overly or unusually high pass rates. This should be similar to the current 'Modules at Risk Identification' investigations focusing on high failure rates and significant increases in failure rates but should check on unusually high pass rates or jumps in pass rates. The assessment criteria for student success during the national lockdown period need to be investigated in light of some faculties' sharp increases in success rates. This needs to include what impact, if any, the increased success rates will have on the quality assurance management of the UFS. Each faculty needs to account for the increase in their success rates and explain the alternative assessment practices used during this time and their adherence to quality standards. An evaluation of the assessment practices and success rates should be completed in the short term, with recommendations for continuous improvement to be implemented,
17. UFS should consider its size and shape in detail, down to an individual programme- and potentially course-level for large service courses. This is crucial in terms of enrolment planning where there appears to be a disconnect between the detailed methodologies of the SEMC and other structures and the teaching staff delivering courses and

programmes. Thus, this should be an inclusive process to ensure that programmes do not become over-enrolled and too big for quality teaching and learning. This should be completed within 12 months of receipt of this report.

Standard 14

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

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

Curriculum transformation is driven by the *Integrated Transformation Plan*, but it is left to faculties to manage, and to individual departments or conveners to implement. While the PoE includes curriculum transformation and decolonisation reports and this results in examples of clear curriculum transformation, academic and senior staff often could not articulate their understanding of it. When interviewed, most responses focused on staff transformation as the only method to transform the university and its curricula. While we recognize that this is a complex and ongoing process, it does not appear that all staff are included and engaged with these ideals. A positive was the feedback from the advisory boards, who feel that they can contribute to the transformation of curricula as part of regular curriculum renewal activities and act as sounding boards on matters of transformation.

There is a significant investment in innovative T&L at UFS. The first-year Gateway programme is also specially recognised as supporting students' transition from secondary school to university. One concern is the resourcing, particularly the university's ongoing resource capacity for these learning innovations. The CTL seems to drive all aspects related to T&L and supporting faculties in attaining their plans. This also included interventions to assist staff in moving online for the Covid lockdowns and continued support in transitioning to a new normal of blended learning. Programme and module reviews regularly occur, with faculties initiating module evaluations and student T&L surveys. The university is actively and deliberately surveying its students regularly, but there are some concerns that not all voices are heard in these surveys. The student voice should be further incorporated into T&L activities.

The facilities at the UFS for T&L are very impressive overall and, in the opinion of the panel, world-class. However, regarding the parity of provision across all campuses, the Bloemfontein campus should be recognised as a remarkable space with brilliant facilities. However, the difference in the quality and nature of the spaces is apparent on the QwaQwa and South campuses, especially in relation to a lack of large teaching venues.

Recommendation

18. UFS should run targeted workshops to deepen the understanding of transformation and the need to transform curricula, engage with all levels of staff, and ensure that staff views curriculum transformation as more than just a staff demographics issue, in order for staff to take ownership of these imperatives. The panel feels that UFS must identify meaningful and measurable targets to transform its curricula. This process should start as soon as possible. Ideally, these should be inclusive experiences bringing student and advisory board voices together with staff from all levels. This recommendation should be considered in conjunction with Recommendation 1.

Standard 15

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

Overall, the student feedback was positive even within the limitations of the campus differences. UFS staff should be complimented on their commitment to the core functions of T&L. This included a notable enthusiasm and passion for the UFS by its students and staff on all three campuses. However, given the inequalities evident across the three campuses, the student and staff experiences of UFS are not the same, which impacts the satisfaction levels. One negative issue raised by the students was the quality of academic advising provided during registration. Many students stayed longer in the system and enrolled in programmes other than the ones they would have preferred, had they known better.

Feedback from student panel interviews suggests that the university takes an active and determined role in attempting to include all students. This approach to "Student Life" appears to work well for on-campus students, especially in Bloemfontein, but is less clear in its effectiveness for day students at the QwaQwa Campus. While some students felt their voices were not heard, most commented that they felt the university listened to their complaints. Students confirmed that they are involved in decision-making bodies, but they went on to report that they feel their voice

may only be included to tick compliance boxes. This was a shared sentiment within the student body regardless of whether they served in the institutional structures or not or were registered for undergraduate or postgraduate qualifications.

Both lecturers and students think that more could be done to improve the institutional culture to benefit the students' chances for success. There was also a sense that, though the institution has experienced changes in its demographic profile for both students and staff over the years, these changes have not translated into a true transformation of the institutional cultural identity from an institution that was historically identified as white, even though there has been an exodus of both white students and white staff members.

Standard 16

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

The UFS has a consistent system for surveying graduates and tracking them, post-qualification. The Graduate Exit Survey tracks graduate employability, with destination surveys planned. Recent students do appear to feel they have good value for money when studying at UFS. This seemed to be particularly true for those with professional qualifications. The alumni office / Institutional Administration focuses on fundraising and connection with the university. The convocation members clearly feel that their opportunities for contribution are limited. They noted a lack of open communication between the Convocation EXCO and the university. While not a formal recommendation, the panel feels strongly that the UFS should do more to engage with their convocation to ensure that these stakeholders do not feel excluded from the University and its decisions.