COUNCIL ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Title: Higher Education Practice Standard for
Experiential Learning

Long Form: *Higher Education Practice Standard for Experiential Learning*

1. Preamble for the HEPS on *Experiential Learning*

Experiential learning (EL) is an educational approach that emphasizes holistic, active engagements and reflection, through the integration of theory and practice (therefore acknowledging the importance of both formal and informal learning as reflected in curricula and co-curricular engagements). In the context of South Africa, a country rich in diverse cultures, histories, and social challenges, experiential learning has the potential to foster transformative learning and promote social change. By immersing learners in real-world contexts and encouraging critical reflection, experiential learning if conducted as intended, equips individuals with the knowledge, skills, and awareness necessary to address complex social issues and contribute to the development of a just and inclusive society. Experiential learning must, therefore, be explicitly framed as transformative, ensuring that work-integrated learning placements and community-based education address historical inequities and expand opportunities for marginalized groups.

The Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) includes the principle of differentiation as critical for establishing an External Quality Agency (EQA) framework that recognizes, observes and celebrates diversity in higher education provision in South Africa (CHE, 2021: 33-38). To express this principle, the Higher Education Practice Standards (HEPS) on EL aligns with and adopts the reflexive-generative approach called for by the QAF.

The HEPS on EL is focused on addressing the role, function, importance and practice of experiential learning within society, emerging from the needs of all actors within higher education, industry, professional bodies, and the community at large. This higher education practice standard allows each institution to define and describe experiential learning as pertinent to its institutional learning strategy in an attempt to address the developmental needs of society.

Experiential Learning should be understood broadly as being learning through reflection in and on doing (CHE, 2022: 54), emphasizing active engagement, reflection, conceptualization and experimentation (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). This involves learning by feeling, thinking and doing, where learners actively participate in real-world activities, engage in problem-solving scenarios, and reflect on their experiences to gain a deeper understanding of the subject matter and the relevance thereof to society at large.

This HEPS is predicated on the understanding that an HEI's learning strategy impacts the success of its graduates to be employed and to add value to their role in transforming the ecosystem (CHE, 2023). Experiential Learning is therefore able to facilitate a holistic focus on the knowledge project within higher education.

This HEPS allows institutions to articulate their experiential learning engagements, be they cooperative, collaborative, and/or coordinated. These may include action-learning, apprenticeships, cooperative education, inter-professional learning, practicum placements, problem-based learning, project-based learning, scenario learning, service-learning, team-based learning, virtual or simulated learning, work-based learning, workplace learning, fieldwork, internships, group projects or any other experiential learning-based engagement.

These engagements will assist stakeholders (such as students, employers, academics and professional body representatives) to gain insight, identify potential strengths and/or areas for improvement, and develop a deeper understanding of the subject matter and its professional and practical implications. Experiential learning therefore provides a dynamic and interactive approach to education for the student, bridging the gap between theory and practice. It empowers students to become active participants in their learning, equipping them with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for success in various domains of life.

While responsive adjustments to and advancement of EL are expected, the HEPS on EL emphasizes that in whichever way an institution positions its learning strategy, EL must be coherent with the evolving requirements of higher education in the South African and global contexts. Institutions should, therefore, critically reflect on the synergy between internal quality assurance (IQA), policies, curricula, and EL.

The HEPS further recognizes that EL drivers are specific to each programme within an institution, framing and reframing its understanding and interpretation of EL in offering quality higher education.

In summary, this HEPS allows Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to refine and reflect on EL and its role within the institutional learning strategy.

2. Rationale for the HEPS on *Experiential Learning*

Within the South African Higher Education context, the CHE Criteria for Programme Accreditation (CHE, 2004) and Work-Integrated Learning: Good Practice Guide (CHE, 2011) focussed on Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) as opposed to EL. Using EL as a comprehensive overarching construct allows for a holistic understanding of EL, including amongst other, approaches such as WIL. The HEPS on EL is fundamental in ensuring HEIs provide well-rounded and inclusive learning experiences to students and stakeholders.

EL theory dates back to the 20th century and the work of John Dewey (Burke *et al.* 2009:18). The significance of human experience was a fundamental component of his ideas about learning. Dewey believed that progress, in educational terms, was in the development of new attitudes towards, new interests in, and a new understanding of experience. Based primarily on the psychological and philosophical work of Dewey, as well as other prominent 20th-century scholars who gave the experience a central role in their theories of human learning and development (notably William James, Kurt Lewin, Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, Carl Jung, Paulo Freire and Carl Rogers). Kolb defines EL as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Passarelli & Kolb 2012:3).

Characteristics of such learning to be noted are that

i) learning is best conceived as a process and does not end at an outcome but occurs through the course of connected experiences in which knowledge is modified and re-formed,

ii) learning is about re-learning and is facilitated by a process that draws out the learners' beliefs and ideas about a topic so that they can be examined, tested and integrated with new, more refined ideas (as in constructivism, where students construct their knowledge of the world based on their experience),

iii) learning is a holistic process of adaptation and results from synergetic transactions between the person and the environment. In Piaget's terms, learning occurs through the equilibration of the dialectic processes of assimilating new experiences into existing concepts.

In South Africa, scholars used western conceptualisation to support the awakening of service learning in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The HEQC/CHE (2006:15) uses the work of Devey, Kolb, and other experiential learning scholars to guide new practitioners in service learning. Le Grange (2007:3) argues a year later that "tracing the theoretical roots of service-learning is based on arborescent thinking, which is hierarchical and dichotomous. I propose that service-learning might be thought of rhizomatically to affirm what is excluded in western

thought, creating new knowledge spaces in which indigenous knowledge and western knowledge can be transformed and integrated."

The standard intends to demonstrate that theory and practice are inextricably linked and that an interrelationship exists between theory and practice where either one can be preceded and deepened by the other. It endeavours to broaden the conceptualisation of learning through experience by not limiting it to a specific approach such as Work Integrated Learning and/or Service Learning. It includes and recognises additional approaches, including through technology, that can be considered and used to be fit for purpose where applicable to achieve the desired outcomes as stated by actors within the ecosystem.

This HEPS should be read in conjunction with the HEPS on *Programme Processes, Modes of Learning and Teaching Provision, Learning Environments, Engaged Institutions, Transitions into, through and from Higher Education* and *Supervision and Assessment of Research*, as these collectively ensure that experiential learning is embedded within curricula, supported by inclusive environments, aligned with institutional engagement, and contributes to transformative graduate outcomes. This is HEPS is particularly important for the development of and design of microcredentials.

3. The HEPS Statement for *Experiential Learning*

The HEPS Statement is an overall statement or set of statements that explicitly describe the codes of practice and agreed-on norms that describe threshold levels or minimum expectations for practice in that area. More than one set of statements is possible when there are sub-sets of practice in the area. The statement(s) describe requirements in the area of practice to ensure acceptable levels of higher education provision, experiences and operations for the students, staff and the public.

HEIs must reflect on EL as a learning modality within qualification offerings and learning and teaching practices, placing the student at the centre of all learning. Factors to be considered are the need to challenge the student to take control of their learning; the employability of students after graduation (creating experiences which are carefully structured within the curriculum to deepen theoretical knowledge and at the same time to create the opportunity for learners to apply the knowledge in a live situation or to apply it to a real-life scenario); and the identification and facilitation of the student's potential contribution to solving some of society's pressing challenges through knowledge generation and transfer. The co-creation of knowledge with and in society and / or industry is paramount.

The acknowledgement and inclusion of input from relevant social actors (e.g., industry and relevant professional bodies) is vital to informing the pertinent learning experience.

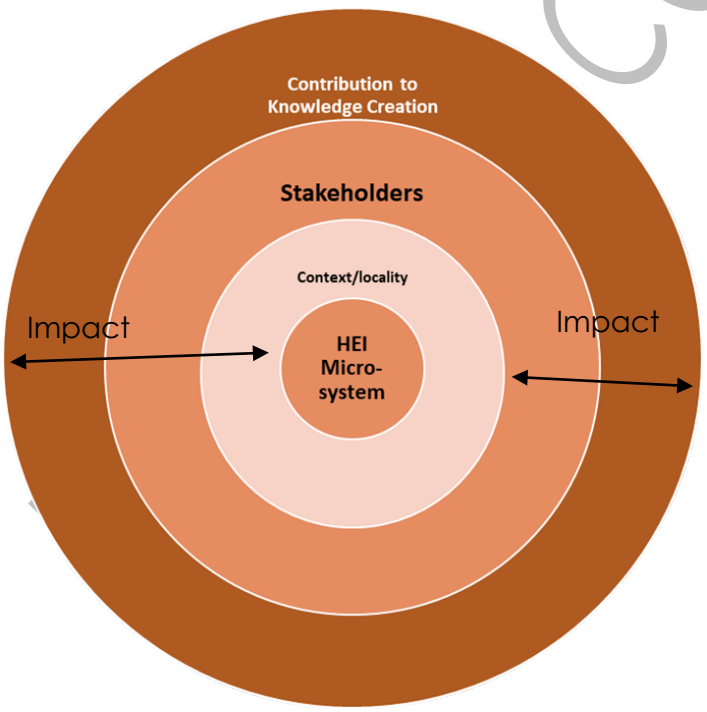
HEIs should select which EL practices will be fit for purpose acknowledging the multi-dimensional reality of practice as informed by technology and consider how the process of EL enhances the quality of learning and the integrity of the qualification offered.

4. Guidelines for the HEPS on *Institutional Identity and Agency*

Guidelines describe how HEPS might be interpreted and implemented. They set out good practice in the relevant area for consideration by the actors involved and provide the basis for differentiation between institutions, e.g. differentiation in terms of size, niche area and NQF level. The Guidelines are open-ended to allow for innovation and provide the basis for differentiation.

The Guidelines are posed as questions that enable institutions to engage with them in generative, reflexive and contextually responsive ways to constantly improve practice in the area. They are also used evaluatively in internal and external quality assurance processes to form the basis for the Criteria that will be developed for future external quality assurance (EQA) functions as described in the QAF such as accreditation and quality reviews.

The guidelines have been grouped into four dimensions: Institutional Identity, Context/Locality, Stakeholders and Impact. These overlap and interact in the following manner:



4.1 Institutional Identity

Identity:

a) What philosophy informs the institutional learning strategy and how does it include EL?
b) How does the HEI conceptualise, promote, monitor and improve EL in its broadest concept and implementation in relation to the institutional learning strategy?
c) How do the institutional and academic governance structures ensure alignment with the agreed-upon EL process?
d) How does the institutional agenda translate into its financial planning, resource allocation and policies in support of EL?
e) What steps are taken to ensure that the institution maintains its EL identity within current regulatory and policy frameworks?
f) How is transformation and inclusivity ensconced within the institution's approach to EL?
g) How does the HEI make provision for the use of AI (artificial intelligence)and BI (business intelligence), including record keeping and the use thereof, in EL?
h) How do HEIs ensure that the scholarship of learning and teaching as evolving in EL becomes part of academic output and academic staff development?

Context and Locality:

a) What are the historical and current factors that enable or constrain EL?
b) How does the institution support EL as a curriculum imperative?
c) How do the HEI's quality assurance processes acknowledge and value the diversity within experiential learning experiences, including recognition of the unique strengths and challenges of participants, as well as considering the language used within their respective sectors while providing flexibility for emerging EL experiences?
d) Where applicable, what measures are in place to provide insurance cover for EL (3rd party, liability, HIV/needle-stick and accident cover)?
e) When applicable, how does the institution recognize and provide for differently-abled students to engage in EL?
f) How are students prepared to ensure an equitable EL experience including the consideration of the diversity of students and any applicable external factors which may impact locality?
g) How is EL reflected in the planning and policy of qualification and programme profiles?
h) How has EL been considered for NQF level 5 to 10 programmes?
i) How is provision made for international student mobility (students placed internationally)?
j) To what extent does the HEI engage with all stakeholders in a collaborative reflection and learning EL imperative?

k) How does the HEI support students' well-being during EL, and act inclusively against any possible disruptions to EL particularly for students who may have been negatively impacted by verifiable external factors?

4.3 Stakeholders

a) How are the HEI's applicable EL external and internal engagements supported?
b) How does the HEI engage in reflective practice to comprehensively assess and align its EL policy, environment and approaches with its institutional identity?
c) How are stakeholders informed about the institutional identity around EL?
d) When applicable how is student placement with approved employers/organizations promoted and applied to ensure students are placed within an organization that will foster maximal learning and growth?
e) What management model or system is in place to support the placement, monitoring and assessment of students for EL?
f) Which mechanisms does the institution use to identify and involve its internal and external stakeholders in shaping and informing EL?
g) How does the institution manage the complexities that arise from multiple stakeholders with different interests in EL?
h) How is relationship management dealt with internally as well as externally, to ensure all stakeholders benefit equitably from the EL engagement?
i) How are the placement partnerships aligned with institutional transformation goals and support national imperatives for equity, redress and social cohesion?

4.4 Impact

a) To what extent are the relevant elements of National Development Programmes and the goal of transformation, integrated into the institution's EL process?
b) Do national, provincial and local development plans impact the HEI's provisioning of EL?
c) How are the determinants of equitable and inclusive assessment ensured?
d) What reflective practice does the institution employ to continually enhance the students' experience (debriefing/reflection)?
e) Which reflective methodologies does the institution engage in to ensure the quality of the various EL modalities within the institution?
f) How does the reflective component lead to the growth and development of EL as a practice to both HEI and other stakeholders?
g) How does the HEI use EL to develop students' comprehensive competencies such as professional identity, awareness, and communication skills, while addressing hidden aspects of the curriculum to promote meaningfulness and foster personal and emotional growth?

h) How is the contribution of EL towards enhancing employability/lifelong learning determined and are there assessment standards for such an evaluation?
i) To what extent and how does the institution monitor and evaluate the impact and effectiveness of its EL approaches, and is the impact assessed according to stakeholder involvement, EL and context/locality?
j) Who is responsible for measuring the impact of EL on the whole HEI learning pedagogy, including the teaching experience, and sharing these with the broader HEI community for interdisciplinary learning and teaching?
k) How will the monitoring and evaluation process for EL approaches result in enhanced effectiveness, recognize and address persistent concerns, and ensure transformation transparency, growth and development of the HEI as well as the stakeholders involved?

5. Criteria

Criteria are the instruments to determine whether the standard is being met or not. They 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. The Criteria depend closely on the purpose of the quality judgement that it is meant to be used for.

Criteria are not included in the standard description. This is because the criteria will be developed to be relevant to the specific quality assurance exercise that is being conducted. This could be an internal quality assurance exercise conducted by an institution, or a specific external quality assurance activity to be conducted by the CHE. Criteria are therefore activity, time and context specific. Some criteria, for example the criteria for accreditation, will be in place for a longer period.

Whenever an External Quality Assurance (EQA) activity is to be undertaken, the CHE will re-convene the Community of Practice to develop the relevant criteria for the exercise.

6. Review of the HEPS

It is understood that the HEPS will be regularly reviewed and revised in an iterative way to account for change. The HEPS on *Institutional Identity and Agency* will be in place for the first iteration of the QAF, for 7 years.

7. References

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