COUNCIL ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Title: Higher Education Practice Standard for

Learning Environments

Long Form: Higher Education Practice Standard on *Learning Environments for/of Higher Education institutions in South Africa*

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1. Preamble for the HEPS on *Learning Environments*

This higher education practice standard (HEPS) on Learning Environments, draws on the intent of the *CHE Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) for Higher Education in South Africa* which is that it should 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 aims to contribute to building confidence in the quality of higher education provisioning and HEI graduates in South Africa (QAF, p29). This HEPS also recognises the importance of formal and informal learning, and the ability to navigate between physical, digital and other learning environments, which contribute to fostering collaboration, social cohesion and transformation. Student success has a direct correlation to the quality of the academic offering and the supporting learning environments. Hence this HEPS complements the other HEPS' that guide and impact teaching, learning, assessment management and provisioning, as well as institutional agency and identity.

Standards relating to learning environments in higher education are important to ensure that educational institutions provide a learning experience for their students that is aligned with

the intended outcomes of the programme offerings, the institutional vision and mission as well as external strategic imperatives (e.g. transformation) that may apply. The need for such standards as codes of practice arises from the recognition that the suitability and quality of learning environments play a critical role in the success of the educational process. Students who are provided with an environment that is supportive of and conducive to learning are more likely to achieve their educational goals and be successful in their chosen careers.

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) function in a rapidly changing global economy, which demands a highly skilled workforce. It can also reasonably be assumed that the majority of higher education students (there are certainly some exceptions) study in order to secure employment. The knowledge and skills required for success in the workforce are constantly evolving, and higher education institutions must adapt to these changes to provide their students with the education they need to succeed. In doing so, it must be recognised that Higher Education institutions, the qualifications they offer to the student population they offer this to, and all related activities and approaches are always subject to context. This higher education practice standard (HEPS) recognises the historical contexts of higher education institutions and the continued disparities evidenced by a socio-economic imbalance, a challenged basic education system, the struggle by learners to transition between school and Higher Education (HE), and inequitable learning environments for a diverse student population. In attempting to consciously redress this imbalance, it is, therefore, important that higher education institutions create learning environments that are fit-for-purpose in alignment with the learning, teaching and assessment goals of the institution and their programme offerings and conducive to enabling every student to achieve academic success, thereby transforming the graduate landscape in line with national needs and imperatives. Learning environments should be conceived not only as spaces of delivery but as transformative ecosystems that redress historical imbalances, support epistemic access and foster socially just student experiences.

The scope of the HEPS on *Learning Environments* is broad, encompassing all aspects of the learning environment. This includes physical facilities, technology infrastructure, faculty qualifications and training, curriculum design, pedagogies, assessment practices, and support services. Standards in each of these areas will help to ensure that the learning environment is conducive to learning and meets the needs of a diverse student body. The scope of the HEPS Learning Environments also enables various cognitive and social outcomes, which include meeting the outcomes of the curriculum, but also the development of other skills, competencies and attitudes which includes, but are not restricted to the graduate attributes expected within a particular field of study, soft skills as often described by the Critical Cross-Field Outcomes (CCFOs), skills required for the 21st century workforce and global citizenship.

The purpose of higher education learning environment standards is to provide a framework for institutions of higher education to improve the quality of the learning experience they provide to their students. Standards help to ensure that educational institutions are meeting the needs of their students and are preparing them for success in their chosen careers.

DRAFT FOR CONSULTATION

Standards also provide a basis for self-reflective evaluation, which helps to ensure that institutions are meeting the expectations of their stakeholders, most importantly their students, but indirectly also the faculty, employers and society as a whole.

The transformation of higher education in South Africa has been closely linked to broader social transformation efforts in the country. During the apartheid era, access to higher education was restricted based on race and the quality of education available to black South Africans was vastly inferior to that available to white South Africans. The apartheid system was officially abolished in 1994, and since then, there have been ongoing efforts to transform higher education in the country to make it more inclusive, equitable and accessible. Overall, the transformation of higher education in South Africa is seen as an important component of broader social transformation efforts in the country. By creating a more inclusive and equitable higher education system, South Africa aims to promote social justice, reduce inequality and build a more prosperous and democratic society. For this reason, the learning environments that students are exposed to during their studies should have this agenda as a priority.

The HEPS for quality *Learning Environments* aims to address the following critical needs to ensure parity of access, inclusivity, transformation and a quality student experience:

All HEIs should provide conducive and flexible learning environments that:

a) are fit-for-purpose in support of their programme offerings and to achieve the required outcomes (e.g., ELOs)

b) strive for equitable access to learning environments and learning experiences that are comparable:

   - across different HEIs, and
   - from one academic year to the next within a specific institution

c) redress historical disparities within the context of institutional transformation and a student-centric learning environment

d) demonstrate an HEI's ability to adapt to changing conditions and circumstances for continued relevance, sustainability and the future world of work in a knowledge economy.

Learning environments encompasses far more than merely the physical spaces in which learning occurs. For some context, the Alliance for Education Solutions describes a high-quality learning environment as being characterised by:

a) Physical and psychological safety

b) High levels of trust and collaboration

c) Solid understanding of the effects of poverty

d) Positive school, family, home and community relationships

e) Needs-based approaches for all students

DRAFT FOR CONSULTATION

f) An engaging and relevant curriculum

g) Student voice and engagement

h) Effective transitions

i) Attention to student attendance and mobility; and

j) Appropriate behavioural interventions.

It is also important to be cognisant of the mode of provision possibilities within the HE environment. The mode of learning and teaching provision may vary between HEIs, specific programmes and even within different courses. The mode of provision would directly impact what the learning environments would be for a specific student. Figure 1 below provides a current snapshot of the possibilities around modes of learning and teaching provision. This snapshot may, however, vary from institution to institution. This HEPS is therefore closely linked to the HEPS on Modes of Learning and Teaching Provision.

Campus Based	• Fully offline • Digitally Supported
Blended / Hybrid	• Digitally Supported • Internet Dependent • Internet Supported
Remote	• Fully Online • Internet Dependent • Internet Supported

This HEPS allows HEIs to assess the nature and quantum of learning environments required for students to achieve the applied competences and outcomes specified in the institutional qualifications mix and that is contextually appropriate to reach such outcomes. This standard focusses on the physical and virtual environments in which learning takes place or that are in support of learning taking place, and which are under the control of the institution. Such environments should follow curriculum design and be appropriate to reach the intended outcomes of the curriculum. The scope of learning environments covers also eco-sustainable solutions and technologies (including AI and robot learning).

The relationship between this HEP Standard and other related HEPS is discussed in light of the enactment of the identity, vision, mission and mandates of higher education and alignment

DRAFT FOR CONSULTATION

to the core mission of learning and teaching and learning, research and innovation as well as community engagement.

The HEPS on *Programme Processes, Modes of Learning and Teaching Provision* and on *Learning, Teaching and Assessment* set the backdrop for the context, and scope for the provision of quality learning environments across an institutional continuum in which its fitness for purpose and fitness of purpose to the achievement of the institutional goals has been evaluated. The HEPS on *Learning Environments* ought also to adequately support and facilitate student transitions into higher education, as well as the take cognisance of data and information management.

And finally, the HEPS on *Institutional Identity and Agency* presents the expectations of and for effective provisioning of institutional learning environments.

The HEPS on *Learning Environments* also focuses on some specific focus areas and dimensions:

Resources:

Higher education institutions must have adequate resources to support learning and teaching. This includes suitably equipped and designed classrooms, libraries, laboratories and other facilities necessary to support student learning for contact delivery and in the case of distance / online offerings the necessary virtual resources, including suitable technological support and virtual library and information centres, that would be fit for purpose and support the desired learning and teaching outcomes.

Accessibility and Inclusiveness:

Learning environments must embody institutional transformation commitments, ensuring physical, digital and social spaces that are inclusive, decolonial and affirming of a diversity of students, staff and other stakeholders. This means that the institution should reasonably provide for students with disabilities and ensure that a contact campus is physically accessible to everyone. The online learning environment should be accessible to all people, including those with disabilities. This means that the website or learning platform must comply with accessibility guidelines to ensure that all content is accessible to everyone. The platform should be easy to navigate and use. The users must be able to easily find what they need, access their courses, and interact with peers and academics.

Privacy, Safety and Security:

Higher education institutions must provide safe and secure learning environments for their students and staff. This involves ensuring that there are measures in place to prevent and respond to emergencies and that the campus is free from discrimination, harassment, bullying or other behaviours on the part of students and staff that would negatively impact the learning and teaching experience. Students' and staffs' privacy and security must be protected. The online learning environment must adhere to privacy laws and regulations, and any communications between students and the institution is cognisant of student privacy.

DRAFT FOR CONSULTATION

Technology:

The use of technology in higher education has become increasingly important and needed. Institutions should ensure that they have up-to-date technology infrastructure and provide training for both staff and students to enable them to effectively use technology tools and resources. The learning platform, where applicable, and all related software must be reliable and function properly.

Support Services:

Students should receive adequate support from academic and administrative staff. Any technology in use should have a help desk, support team or equivalent available to answer any questions, provide assistance with technical issues, and offer guidance on course content. Students require access to various support services to help them succeed academically and personally. Institutions should provide counselling services, career services, academic advising and mentorship programs to support their student's growth and development.

Sustainability:

Whilst sustainability is not a direct Learning Environment, it is the duty of higher education in general to develop citizens that are at least aware of the importance of sustainability. Whilst leading by example is always preferred, the environment in which students find themselves during the educational path should expose and/or introduce students to good sustainability practices. Such practices include energy efficiency, water conservation, waste reduction and environmental education which requires some incorporation of environmental issues and sustainability in the curricula, research and outreach activities of higher education institutions.

Institutions of higher education must have continuous reflective practices in place, where the focus on learning environments must incorporate a process of continuous improvement, with ongoing monitoring and evaluation to identify areas for enhancement and improvement.

2. Rationale for the HEPS on *Learning Environments*

The rationale for a HEPS on *Learning Environments* is to ensure that the learning spaces and resources available to students are conducive to their academic success. The standard aims to promote the design of learning environments that foster intellectual growth, critical thinking and creativity among students. This standard has to take into account the following:

- HEIs' institutional identity and agency, mandates, programme offerings and offering modalities;
- universal, physical and epistemological access to learning environments in a specific context that will support the educational path of a diverse student body; and

DRAFT FOR CONSULTATION

- the institutional transformation and inclusivity priorities, including aspects such as health and safety, sustainability etc.

The points of departure for this standard include research findings on how physical and virtual learning environments impact student learning outcomes, as well as the changing nature of higher education. With the rise of technology and an increasing demand for flexible learning options, higher education institutions need to embrace innovative approaches to support their learning and teaching practices.

Conducive learning environments are therefore a prerequisite for the realisation of transformative learning and teaching practices. It is informed by practices such as programme development, teaching and learning strategies and requirements, before the actual learning and teaching dependence on such conducive learning environments is required.

The philosophical stance of the HEPS on *Learning Environment* emphasises the importance of creating inclusive, human-centred environments that support diverse student and staff needs. It recognises the interdependence between pedagogy, technology and the physical environment in shaping the quality of the learning and teaching experience.

Learning environments should intentionally be designed to meet student needs and realities within the context of their individual learning paths and lived experiences. Cognition of the external socio-economic disparities should inform the provision of equitable access to learning environments and resources so that the programme learning outcomes are realised by individual students based on how they can best achieve learning outcomes.

Ultimately, the HEPS on *Learning Environments* in the South African higher education space seek to promote student engagement, well-being and academic success by providing an enabling environment for learning.

Whilst learning environments cannot resolve all issues pertaining to social justice issues, they can and should take into account how to minimise the impact of such injustices on the students during their learning paths, for example, where it is known that a large portion of the student body has limited access to data, the design of learning content on the LMS should be data-conscious.

Certain assumptions pertain when developing a HEPS on *Learning Environments*, inter alia:

- Learning is not confined to structured learning environments such as classrooms and lecture theatres. It includes virtual environments and environments outside the actual institution, for example, Work Integrated Learning environments as well as environments where students would feel emotionally supported and safe.
- Student-centred learning environments constitute the goal of promoting an enhanced student learning experience, whether it may occur in physical, virtual or social spaces or wherever the students are learning. Learning environments should allow students to engage meaningfully with learning content and activities towards achieving learning outcomes.

DRAFT FOR CONSULTATION

- HEIs should consider the design and accommodate student-centred learning needs in alignment with health and safety regulations, infrastructure and facilities norms and standards, be eco-friendly and gender-sensitive, etc.
- Learning environments should be subjected to regular and continuous re-evaluation and fit-for-purpose reviews, including embracing new trends/ technologies and functional designs for optimised learning and teaching.
- Data and information systems must be considered for this HEP to leverage value in higher educational institutions. Data collection and management for learning environments must adhere to the POPIA Act and acceptable codes of practice for higher education and feed into an updated integrated institutional data management plan.

This HEPS should be read in conjunction with related HEPS on *Institutional Identity and Agency*, *Programme Processes, Modes of Learning and Teaching Provision, Learning, Teaching and Assessment*, *Experiential Learning, Student Transitions, the Data Value Chain, Engaged Institutions, Continuous Professional Learning, Supervision and Assessment of Research* and *Research and Innovation*, as together they ensure that learning environments are inclusive, transformative, and systemically aligned.

3. Statement for the HEPS on *Learning Environments*

Learning environments in higher education should ensure acceptable levels of provision, experiences and operations for students, staff and other stakeholders within the context of a specific institution's agency, learning and teaching modalities, size, programme offerings, student demographics and related aspects as applicable within a specific context. Broadly speaking all Learning Environments should ensure that:

- a continuum of conducive and inclusive learning environments of and for learning are provided
- equitable access to environments that are fit-for-purpose in support of an institution's programme offerings, but also co-curricular opportunities for enhancing learning, with a clear focus to redress historical disparities within the context of institutional transformation are provided, and
- an institution's ability to adapt to changing conditions and circumstances for continued relevance and sustainability is prioritized.

Learning environments therefore ought to be:

- reliable, stable and constant (predictable) to ensure a conducive student experience

DRAFT FOR CONSULTATION

- suitable, flexible and equitable
- compliant with regulatory standards, health and safety requisites and the like
- student-centric needs and designed for enhancing individual and collaborative learning
- accessible for equity of use
- consider the environment and sustainability.

This standard applies to all stakeholders involved in the design, development and management of learning environments, including but not limited to staff, students, parents, facility managers, and design professionals as applicable in each context.

4. Guidelines for the HEPS on *Learning Environments*

The guiding principles are stated as questions that enable institutions to engage in a generative, reflexive and contextually responsive way to constantly improve practice in the area of learning environments. Institutions, as part of their internal quality control measures, would need to address each question, describing the current state, the desired future state where applicable, and how the gap (if any) will be addressed.

The questions set out good practice in the relevant area for consideration by the stakeholders involved and provide the basis for differentiation between institutions, e.g., differentiation in terms of size, niche area and NQF level. It should be noted that Work Integrated Learning environments form part of the quality assurance process. The Guidelines are open-ended to allow for innovation and provide the basis for differentiation.

General guidelines	a) How does the institutional leadership provide vision, direction, and resources for the project and ensures that learning environments align with the goals and objectives of the institution?
	b) What are the key components of quality assurance for learning environments in the institution?
	c) How is technology being leveraged to support quality assurance efforts related to learning environments in the institution?
	d) What role do academic and support staff play in ensuring the quality of learning environments within the institution?
	e) How are student feedback and evaluation being used to inform quality assurance efforts related to learning environments in the institution?
	f) How does the institution use partnerships with industry and other external stakeholders to support quality assurance efforts in their learning environments?

DRAFT FOR CONSULTATION

	g) What are some of the challenges and barriers to implementing effective quality assurance initiatives regarding the learning environments within the institution?
	h) What are the specific transformational considerations involved in quality assuring the learning environments within the institution?
	i) How is stakeholder feedback (academic and support staff, students and other stakeholders) used to ensure and improve learning environments?
	j) Where an institution operates over multiple sites, how is parity of provision across all such sites ensured?
	k) How does the institution plan and maintain learning spaces systematically and proactively, and in consultation with relevant stakeholders such as academic staff, students, specialists in inclusive learning space design and assistive technologies, and infrastructure management staff?
	l) How does the institution, where applicable, ensure that physical learning environments are designed to be flexible and adaptable to accommodate changing needs and changing technology?
	m) How does the institution ensure that relevant departments e.g. ICT, Facilities, Health & Safety, Libraries, Classroom Support, etc, across the institution work together to ensure all formal and structured learning environments are cognisant and reflective of changing approaches to learning and teaching; the inter-disciplinary nature of academic work and the different ways of accessing knowledge and exploring new ideas among peers?
	n) Where applicable, how does the institution allow facilities to be used for learning and teaching, such as lighting, audio-visual equipment and internet access?
	o) How does the institution involve all parties who are affected by or have an impact on learning environments, including but not restricted to students, educators, administrators and campus management?
	p) How does the institution ensure a focus on communicating information related to learning environments that ensures all stakeholders are aware of any existing or new matters related to their learning environment?
	q) How does the institution ensure that all students have an equal opportunity to access and engage with educational resources, regardless of their socioeconomic background?
	r) How does the institution ensure the transformation of learning environments that are focused on creating opportunities for students to

DRAFT FOR CONSULTATION

	develop their critical thinking, problem-solving, and creative skills, as well as their social and emotional competencies?
	s) How does the institution provide opportunities for students to engage in active and collaborative learning? This includes opportunities for students to interact with each other and with their lecturers, participate in group projects and activities, and apply their knowledge in real-world settings.
	t) How does the institution allocate budget equitably and efficiently to ensure that all essential components of the learning environment are adequately funded? This includes the design, development, and delivery of learning materials, technology, and support services?
	u) How does the institution ensure that facilities are maintained, updated and available to students to use? This includes technology equipment, instructional materials, supplies, and laboratory equipment.
	v) What are the institutional governance and management structures in place to manage and control the operations of an organisation? This involves establishing policies, procedures, and processes that dictate how the organization will be run, who has the authority to make decisions, and how these decisions will be implemented.
	w) How does the institution use data and information management to ensure that the learning environment is of appropriate quality, aligned to best practice and reviewed and updated regularly to ensure that it remains relevant and effective?
	x) How does the institution accommodate regular opportunities for all stakeholders to reflect on the current learning environment and provide feedback on what is working well and what can be improved?
	y) How does the institution use feedback received and new ideas for improvement?
	z) How does the institution measure new ideas that were been implemented, the impact of these changes and then further refine its approach to the various learning environments?
	aa) How does the institution ensure universal access to library and information services that are inclusive, transformative, committed to decolonisation and the lead advocate for open access, therefore demonstrating its ability to adapt and redefine itself within the context of the digital revolution?
	bb) What is the budget allocation and approach in the institution's central budget to learning environments including but not exclusive to

DRAFT FOR CONSULTATION

	information resources (print and electronic), operational costs, ICT, facilities and maintenance?
	cc) How does the institution manage the various aspects of learning environments through appropriate governance structures and processes?
	dd) How does the institution ensure access to support structures and information concerning learning environments?

Resources	a) How does the institution ensure that physical environments, where applicable and including seating, lighting, acoustics, equipment and suitable educational technology are appropriate and fit for purpose?
	b) What processes and policies are in place to ensure that informal/social learning environments, both physical and virtual, support the programme outcomes as well as the vision and mission of the institution?
	c) Do the virtual learning spaces encompass virtual learning environments such as access to information (virtual libraries) and support structures?
	d) Where applicable, how do institutional policies guide the utilisation of space within physical learning environments to ensure that they are used efficiently and effectively? This includes guidelines for class size, the allocation of resources and technology, and the use of flexible learning spaces.
	e) What are the institutional policies in the development of the library's collections based on the needs of its users, including a balance of print and digital resources, primary source materials, databases and journals?
	f) What is the institutional approach to attracting and retaining suitably qualified, skilled and competent staff who are agile to change and respond to institutional and user needs for physical, digital and library management?

Accessibility and inclusiveness	a) How does the institution ensure that learning environments are designed to meet the functional requirements of all stakeholders, including accessibility, safety, and sustainability?
	b) How does the institution ensure that infrastructure and facilities are accessible and inclusive to all students, regardless of their abilities, disabilities or socio-economic factors?

DRAFT FOR CONSULTATION

	c) How does the institution ensure accessibility to technology platforms, where required, from a variety of devices and platforms such as tablets or mobile devices through the appropriate use of responsive design?

Privacy, Safety and Security	a) What institutional measures are in place to ensure that all infrastructure and facilities are designed and maintained to provide a safe learning and living environments for all students?
	b) How does the institution ensure that the data and information that is collected and managed by physical and digital means in relation to students and staff usage of learning environments are POPIA-compliant and aligned with good code of practice for Higher Education?
	c) What policies and implementation guidelines are in place related to privacy and security; staff and student conduct; copyright and legal compliance and staff development relating to learning environments?

DRAFT FOR CONSULTATION

Technology	a) Does the institution's requirements toward learning and teaching accommodate the infusion of technology in all learning spaces that enable connectivity, connections, access etc.?
	b) What are the institutional guidelines and requirements for the use of digital resources, the allocation of technology equipment and infrastructure and the integration of technology into the curriculum?
	c) How does the institution factor in aspects such as technology infrastructure, computer and network access, multimedia equipment, and data visualization resources in the learning and teaching strategy?
	d) How does the institution use technology to enhance learning by means of engaging students with their studies through for example Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) and library systems, which are accessible and inclusive and cater for a wide range of potential learner requirements?
	e) How does the institution ensure that digital literacy for staff and students match the educational requirement and support their own development of digital skills?

Sustainability	a) What are the policies and practices to ensure environmental sustainability awareness and practices amongst students?
	b) What is the institutional policy and approach to infrastructure and facilities being designed and maintained sustainably, reducing their impact on the environment and conserving resources?

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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 *Learning Environments* will be in place for the first iteration of the QAF, for 7 years.

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