COUNCIL ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Framework for the National Review

of

Programmes

September 2012

FOREWORD

The Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), a permanent committee of the Council on Higher Education (CHE), carries out quality assurance in higher education by virtue of the Higher Education Act (No. 101 of 1997, as amended). In terms of this Act, the CHE's mandate includes quality promotion and capacity development, institutional audit and programme accreditation. In addition, the National Qualifications Framework Act (No. 67 of 2008) assigns to the CHE the role of Quality Council for higher education, which brings with it additional responsibilities. In the main these relate to the management and quality assurance of the sub-framework of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) dedicated to higher education, that is, the Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF).

Programme accreditation is a form of quality assurance practised in many countries and is usually associated with purposes of accountability and improvement in the quality of programmes. In common with higher education systems in many parts of the world, South African higher education faces multiple stakeholder demands for greater responsiveness to societal needs through enhanced student access and mobility, through research and innovation that address social and economic development, and through engagement with local, regional and international communities. Stakeholders also require that higher education institutions provide the public with comprehensive information on the manner in which they maintain the quality and standards of their core academic activities, and demonstrate sustained improvement in this regard.

The HEQC's approach to programme accreditation and re-accreditation is strongly shaped by the complex challenges facing higher education institutions in South Africa in an era of increased accountability and in a context of constant change. The programme accreditation system seeks to be responsive to the objectives of higher education transformation as reflected in various policy and legislative documents published since 1994. In fact, a fundamental premise of the HEQC's approach to quality assurance, and to programme accreditation and national review in particular, is to ensure that improved and sustainable quality forms part of the transformation goals of higher education institutions.

Between 2004 and 2011 the CHE discharged its responsibility for the accreditation of programmes in terms of the HEQC's *Framework for Programme Accreditation* of 2004. Seen as a specialised form of accreditation that made use of the *Framework for Programme Accreditation*, no National Review Framework was considered for approval as the process had yet to be fully developed and tested. The first decade of the accreditation process, including two national reviews consisting of the re-accreditation of selected existing programmes, also ran concurrently with the first cycle of institutional audits.

As the CHE is entering its second period of quality assurance it is an opportune time to revise or develop and formalise new frameworks. The overall findings of the *External Evaluation Report of the HEQC of the CHE, South Africa* (2009) pointed to the need to focus on higher education teaching and learning to enhance the levels of educational quality. The increased focus on teaching and learning will have greater impact on the institutional audit/review approach and methodology, than on the national review or programme accreditation approach and process which will largely continue on the same basis as before.

The external review report recognised national review as a high impact area within the quality assurance functions of the CHE. The *Framework for the National Review of Programmes* represents a milestone in the CHE's quality assurance programme as it signals the growth and maturity of the national review function within an independent CHE directorate.

It is important to emphasise that institutions are ultimately responsible for programme quality and that the HEQC is responsible for a rigorous external system of programme accreditation that can validate institutional information on the quality of programmes offered. The CHE's national programme review system evaluates existing programmes through a process of peer review where programmes that meet the CHE's criteria and minimum standards are granted accreditation.

The *Framework for the National Review of Programmes* sets out the re-accreditation policy framework for programmes offered by higher education institutions that fall within the HEQF and under the jurisdiction of the CHE. These institutions include universities, public colleges offering higher education programmes and private providers of higher education. Depending on the programme which is reviewed, professional bodies may be consulted and involved in the review process as they set and implement the conditions for the registration professional to practice.

The national review process is aligned with the programme accreditation system which evaluates new programmes and existing programmes (linked to the institutional registration cycle of the Department of Higher Education and Training) and Higher Education Qualification Framework alignment purposes through a process of peer and expert review. Only programmes that meet the criteria and minimum standards receive accreditation. Even in a small higher education system like South Africa, the regular re-accreditation of a large number of existing programmes on a cyclical basis is not feasible. Therefore, one of the ways to assure existing programme quality is through the use of a national programme review of select programmes.

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September 2012

ACRONYMS

CHE	Council on Higher Education
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
ETQA	Education and Training Quality Assurer
HEI	Higher education institution
HEQC	Higher Education Quality Committee
HEQF	Higher Education Qualifications Framework
NLRD	National Learners' Records Database
NPHE	National Plan for Higher Education
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
PQM	Programme and Qualification Mix
QA	Quality Assurance
QC	Quality Council
QCTO	Quality Council for Trades & Occupations
TNE	Transnational education

CONTENTS

1 QUALITY ASSURANCE AND THE SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

1.1 NATIONAL POLICY AND LEGISLATIVE CONTEXT

Quality assurance is the responsibility of the HEQC which is a permanent committee of the CHE, established by the Higher Education Act (No. 101 of 1997). The CHE is also a Quality Council as established by the NQF Act (No. 67 of 2008).

The CHE's responsibilities are to:
- Advise the Minister at his/her request or proactively on all matters related to higher education.
- Assume executive responsibility for quality assurance within higher education and training.
- Monitor and evaluate whether the policy goals and objectives for higher education are being realised.
- Contribute to developing higher education through publications and conferences.
- Report to parliament on higher education.
- Consult with stakeholders on higher education matters.

The specific functions of the HEQC are to:
- Promote quality assurance in higher education.
- Audit the quality assurance mechanisms of institutions of higher education.
- Accredit programmes of higher education.

The origin of the way in which the work of the CHE is conducted lies in the transformative intention of early South African democratic legislation in education. The parameters for carrying out these mandates are to be found in, amongst others: *The Higher Education Act* as amended, White Paper 3: *A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education,* the *National Plan for Higher Education* (NPHE) and, more recently, the amended SAQA and NQF legislation as well as the CHE itself.

Until 2008 the CHE was the Education and Training Quality Assurer (ETQA) accredited by SAQA to carry out quality assurance in higher education. Legislative amendments have placed quality assurance across the education and training sector in the hands of three Quality Councils (QCs) (replacing the ETQA concept). Umalusi is responsible for general and further education and training (established in terms of the General and Further Education and Training Quality Assurance Act of 2001 GENFETQA Act); the CHE is responsible for higher education (established in terms of the Higher Education Act); and the Quality Council for Trades & Occupations (QCTO) is responsible for the occupational sector (established in terms of the Skills Development Act).

According to the NQF Act, each Quality Council is required to:
- Develop and manage its qualifications sub-framework and advise the Minister on matters relating to it
- Develop and implement policy and criteria for the development of qualifications as needed in the sector

- Recommend qualifications to SAQA for registration
- Execute a quality assurance function within its sub-framework
- Maintain a database of learner achievements and related matters and submit such data to SAQA for the National Learners' Records Database (NLRD)
- Conduct research on matters pertaining to its sub-framework.

While the NQF Act provides for the QCs to delegate certain functions under certain conditions, in terms of the Higher Education Act (101 of 1997 as amended), the CHE may not delegate its quality assurance functions beyond its Committee, the HEQC.

The accreditation function of the CHE, as one of its quality assurance mechanisms carried out by the HEQC, is related to specific DHET and SAQA functions and activities:

- The DHET approves the programme and qualification mixes (PQMs) of public higher education institutions, and funds programmes that are accredited by the HEQC.
- The HEQC of the CHE accredits programmes offered by institutions of higher education in terms of a set of quality criteria.
- The DHET registers all private higher education programmes and their associated accredited programmes before they are allowed to operate.
- SAQA registers each accredited learning programme offered by an institution of higher education on the NQF.

At the recommendation of the HEQC, the Council of the CHE approves the policy and procedures for the quality assurance work of the CHE. Under the current legislation, the HEQC has executive responsibility for accreditation and other quality assurance decisions. It makes its judgements independently of other national agencies and professional bodies, but takes into consideration their work where issues of quality and standards are involved. The HEQC's decisions are based on peer evaluation and expert review processes.

1.2 CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

The first decade of quality assurance sought to provide external measures for improving quality and enhancing accountability in an equitable manner across the higher education system. Higher education in that period was characterised by a legacy of fragmentation, uneven provision, and racial segregation and needed to address the challenges of transformation in line with the demand for social and economic justice that is at the core of the agenda for democratic change in South Africa. Part of the latter involved extensive restructuring of the public higher education system; the large scale programme of mergers of particular institutions, the redefining of institutional missions and types in certain cases, the introduction of a new qualifications framework, the introduction of a new funding formula and the advent of external quality assurance. During the first period of quality assurance (2004 – 2010) the regulated private sector also grew in terms of number of providers, students enrolled and qualifications offered, such that it is no longer a small relatively homogenous group. While the initial challenges of transformation such as the need for increased access and equity opportunities for previously marginalised groups, and the need for increased throughput, retention and graduation rates in academic programmes remain, the size and shape of the higher education system has altered significantly, and new challenges have emerged. Among these is the

need to manage the unintended consequences of particular mergers, the potential introduction of new public higher education institutions, the nascent mission differentiation of different types of institution and the impact thereof on programme offerings, the emergence of new forms and modes of offering that challenge traditional definitions, and different levels of institutional engagement with the quality assurance processes both external and internal.

The framework then emerges in a changed context characterised by:

- Institutions at different stages of quality assurance development
- Mergers and other changes in institutional structures
- Growth and expansion in the private higher education sector – including institutions establishing new sites of delivery
- The introduction of the HEQF
- A change in the role of the CHE as a result of its new status as a quality council
- Uncertainty regarding the precise articulation between the three QCs and changed roles vis-á-vis other stakeholders in a national regulatory system that is in flux
- Challenges relating to the need to increase access, throughput, retention and graduation rates, and to improve teaching and learning to facilitate the achievement of these ends
- Challenges relating to the need to increase the pool of basic and applied knowledge to enhance understanding, social application and economic and social development
- Challenges relating to the emergence of new educational technologies and modes of delivery, namely to adapt, innovate and develop academic programmes which enhance graduate attributes and skills needed in South Africa, particularly in view of national human resource development priorities.

Given the above, the maintenance, improvement and assurance of quality becomes yet more critical to the achievement of the transformational goals of the higher education system. The national quality assurance review activities of the CHE are therefore conducted in the context of the national transformation agenda that seeks to establish a quality higher education system that is able to address the complex knowledge development needs of South African society.

2 THE CHE'S ACCREDITATION MODEL

2.1 INTRODUCTION

As a Quality Council, the CHE is responsible, among other responsibilities, for the quality assurance of the qualifications in its sub-framework, the HEQF, which it discharges through the activities of the HEQC. The qualification standards development function of the CHE also has an impact on quality assurance, as quality assurance involves the maintenance and improvement of higher education standards. The re-accreditation of programmes through a national review process makes use of standards to determine the accreditation status of an existing programme. A national review of an existing programme is, however, one part of an interconnected national quality assurance system. Other forms of quality assurance undertaken by the CHE are institutional audits which focus on the management of quality at an institutional level, and the accreditation of new programmes. Together

they represent a continuum of external quality assurance processes from those that have a hard accountability edge to those that are more developmental in orientation.

As the external quality assurance processes of the CHE enter into its second period, the need for the range of processes is affirmed. While the next period of quality assurance builds on the first period, there are two particular shifts in focus. The first takes account of the lessons learned about the state of provision in higher education, particularly through the first round of institutional audits, and recognises the need to pay more focused attention at a different level than institutional-level policies, structures and processes, to the improvement of quality in teaching and learning as one of the core areas of institutional operation. It was found during the audits that undergraduate teaching and learning is subject to a variety of challenges and constraints that undermine the achievement of desired levels of quality in higher education, and that such challenges require further focused and creative engagement in order to resolve them. Consequently, the second shift is towards a greater balance between improvement and accountability, without compromising ensuring quality of educational provision across the system.

The next period of quality assurance has implications for institutional audits in particular, which will be called 'institutional reviews', in improving teaching and learning in institutional contexts. Programme accreditation and national review processes will continue on much the same basis as previously. However, protecting students from poor quality programmes and maintaining the integrity of qualifications are key concerns of the CHE. The purpose of accreditation and national review is to assure the adherence by institutions to minimum standards in their educational offerings.

2.2 PRINCIPLES OF ACCREDITATION

The following principles are based on the 2004 *Programme Accreditation Framework* and guide the programme accreditation and the national review models:

- The primary responsibility for programme and institutional quality rests with higher education institutions themselves. Institutions should seek to establish and sustain effective mechanisms to facilitate the offering of programmes of quality and which yield reliable information for internal programme-related planning and self-evaluation, external evaluation and public reporting. Institutional accreditation is the mechanism used to evaluate this.
- Higher education institutions must demonstrate their capacity to offer programmes of acceptable quality at the higher education level that meet the criteria and minimum standards designed to promote such quality before they may be offered.
- Only those programmes that satisfy minimum quality requirements will be allowed to offered in the higher education system.
- The HEQC's responsibility is to maintain a robust external system of programme accreditation and institutional accreditation that can validate institutional information on the effectiveness of minimum standards and arrangements for assuring the quality of academic programmes.

- Accreditation by the HEQC is based on a system of peer and expert review, in the context of accreditation criteria, which ensures transparent, credible and consistent decision-making on the quality of programmes and institutional capacity.

2.3 THE OBJECTIVES OF ACCREDITATION

The objectives of the accreditation model are to:

- Assure and enhance the quality of higher education programmes and institutions by identifying and granting recognition status to programmes and institutions that satisfy the HEQC's minimum standards for provision, or demonstrate their potential to do so in a stipulated period of time.
- Protect students from low quality programmes through accreditation arrangements that build on reports from self-evaluation and external evaluation activities, including other CHE processes, and other relevant sources of information.
- Encourage and support providers to institutionalise a culture of self-managed evaluation that builds on and surpasses minimum standards and to recognise and reward such through formal institutional accreditation processes.
- Increase the confidence of the public in higher education programmes and qualifications.
- Facilitate articulation between programmes of different higher education sectors and institutions.

A national review of programmes is located within an overall national quality assurance system that includes accreditation and institutional audits/reviews and which is aligned with the aims and intentions of the HEQF and associated qualifications standards. The outcomes of a national re-accreditation process are complementary to those of the other CHE other quality assurance processes. The QA processes also take into account the work done by the CHE Standards Development Directorate on qualifications standards which forms part of the CHE's mandate areas.

4 THE NATIONAL REVIEW PROCESS

The success and impact of the national review process is based on an understanding of its principles, instruments and procedures. This section outlines the elements of the national review process. Details of the process are comprehensively addressed in the *National Review Manual.*

4.1 OVERVIEW OF A NATIONAL REVIEW

4.1.1 COMPONENTS OF A NATIONAL REVIEW

The components of a national review include:

- Decision-making with regard to the programme to be reviewed;
- Identification of all providers who offer the programme;
- Institutional self-evaluation of the programme against the criteria and minimum standards and the compilation of a self-evaluation report;
- HEQC peer-review panel site visits to all institutions offering the programme under review;

- Re-accreditation decision making;
- Follow-up processes in the case of programmes not achieving full accreditation;
- Publication of an HEQC report on the national state of provision of the programme.

4.1.2 *THE FUNCTION OF THE HEQC NATIONAL REVIEW COMMITTEE*

The HEQC National Review Committee is an HEQC standing committee. It comprises senior academics with expertise in programme accreditation and, depending on the particular review, expert peers from within the disciplinary area of the programme. The terms of reference for the National Review Committee include the following:

- Recommend possible areas of national review to the HEQC.
- Evaluate draft reports for their consistency and tone before they are sent to higher education institutions for comment.
- Review progress reports to confirm that improvement plans have been implemented and completed. Recommend to the HEQC that the review process can be concluded, or that further engagement with an institution is required.
- Provide support and advice on the efficient and effective implementation of the national review system.
- Analyse institutional improvement plans for their coverage and thoroughness in addressing recommendations for the programme. Where required, it can forward concerns to the HEQC for its consideration.
- Raise systemic issues which may arise out of the national review process for the attention of the HEQC.

In carrying out its work, the National Review Committee checks for use of evidence and consistency in judgements made in the programme reports. It takes into account available evidence for such judgements within and across reports.

4.2 IDENTIFYING PROGRAMMES FOR A NATIONAL REVIEW

In reaching its decision to undertake a national review of a particular programme, the HEQC will take into account factors such as identified areas of national need; concerns raised by higher education stakeholders; unwarranted proliferation or paucity of programmes in that particular area; expressed concerns related to current quality of provision in the programme; or any other demonstrably substantive reason.

Notwithstanding the specific area identified for a national review, the main purposes of such a review, expressed in terms of the components identified above, are common to all national reviews.

4.2.1 *DEVELOPMENT AND APPROVAL OF A PROPOSAL FOR A PROGRAMME REVIEW*

The development of a proposal for HEQC approval on the selected programme for the national review includes:

- Consultation with experts, peers and other relevant stakeholders in the programme area;
- A review of local and international literature on any evaluations or accreditations completed on the programme;

- Gathering baseline data on providers offering the programme to determine the number of programmes that require re-accreditation;
- Selection of the programme to be re-accredited;
- Establishment of a reference group of providers and relevant stakeholders to comment on the proposal and to assist in shaping the re-accreditation criteria. The reference group may include international as well as local discipline and teaching and learning experts.

The outcome of this process is a National Review Committee proposal to the HEQC for a national review of the selected programme.

4.2.2 FINALISATION OF CRITERIA AND MIMIMUM STANDARDS

Using the criteria and minimum standards set out in the *Criteria for Programme Accreditation*, the HEQC, in consultation with experts, peers and other relevant stakeholders, develops and finalises the criteria and standards for the re-accreditation of the programme. The re-accreditation criteria and standards apply to *all* institutions offering the programme and to *all* modes of delivery. Additional criteria and standards may be applicable, for example, in the case of the use of technology, such as e-learning.

4.3 THE ASSEMBLY OF DATA FOR PROGRAMME REVIEW

4.3.1 INSTITUTIONAL SELF-EVALUATION OF THE PROGRAMME

The CHE attaches great importance to institutional self-evaluation with a view to improving the quality of programmes. To this end, the assembly of data for the review commences with insitutional self-evaluation of the identified programme against the criteria and minimum standards.

The compilation of the self-evaluation report requires the department/ unit offering the programme to engage in critical self-evaluation leading to evidence-based claims on the achievement of minimum standards, the identification of areas of good practice, areas for improvement, and any other interventions which might be required to enhance the quality of the programme.

In cases where institutions identify their programme as being in need of improvement – either as a whole or in respect of individual criteria – the self-evaluation report should include steps for improvement together with timelines.

4.3.2 HEQC PEER-REVIEW PANELS FOR SITE VISITS

This part of the review corresponds with the actual evaluation of the programme. The HEQC will:

- Appoint expert peer-review panels to conduct institutional site visits;
- Arrange for the training of evaluators and report writers;
- Assess the institutional self-evaluation portfolios with the assistance of review panels comprising peers and experts, and make this documentation available to panellists;
- Develop a schedule of site visits, and communicate detail of panel visit/s to institutions concerned.

Institutions have the opportunity to comment on the composition of the panel on the basis of a potential conflict of interest.

Panellists are required to sign declarations of confidentiality.

The chair or designated person in the review panel prepares a draft report after each site visit and submits this to the National Review Directorate. This is a holistic report based on both the institutional self-evaluation report and peer judgements emanating from the site visit.

4.4 PEER-REVIEW DECISION-MAKING: JUDGEMENTS AND OUTCOMES

4.4.1 JUDGEMENTS

Members of peer review panels have the responsibility to apply their discipline and subject knowledge in making appropriate judgements within the context of the programme being evaluated for re-accreditation purposes. The extent to which the programme meets the minimum standards of each criterion will be assessed through an evaluation of an institution's self-evaluation report and appendices and through the collection of oral and documentary evidence during the site visit by review panels. While there is interpretative scope for evaluators, professional judgements on whether the criteria and minimum standards are met are evidence-based. Such evidence constituted from documentation, observations, interviews or other data must be collected systematically and documented both from institutional submissions and site visits. Such evidence must be used to provide a coherent rationale for each judgement.

Documentary and other forms of evidence that cannot realistically be submitted to the HEQC together with self-evaluation portfolios should be displayed on site, suitably labelled and cross-referenced with the portfolio in such a way as to facilitate the work of the panellists.

Peer-review panels will first evaluate the programme against each of the individual HEQC criteria by using one of the following categories of judgement: *meets minimum standards, needs improvement,* or *does not comply*. These categories of judgement are used both in the self-evaluation undertaken by the institution in respect of the relevant programme and in the external evaluation managed by the HEQC.

4.4.2 OUTCOMES

The outcomes of the accreditation process in respect of each programme will be determined in a holistic manner and not merely by mechanistically calculating the sum total of outcomes against individual criteria. In each case, this results in one of the following programme outcomes:

- *Commend*
- *Accreditation*
- *Accreditation with conditions*
- *Programme on notice for withdrawal of accreditation,* or
- *No accreditation*.

The following classification will be used for the re-accreditation outcomes of the programme as a whole:

Evaluation against HEQC criteria	Classification of accreditation outcome
Commend All criteria and minimum standards are met and, in addition, examples of good practice and innovation are identified in relation to several criteria.	Continuation of accreditation
Meets Minimum Standards Minimum standards as specified under the criterion are met.	Continuation of accreditation
Needs Improvement (1) A programme that does not meet the minimum standards but with shortcomings that can be remedied within a six month period. (2) Not all the critical minimum standards relating to programme design, work-integrated learning (where applicable), teaching and learning and assessment are met. Moreover, the programme has weaknesses in relation to the remaining criteria which have the potential to impact on the overall quality of teaching and learning.	(1) Accredited with conditions (2) Programme on notice for withdrawal of accreditation: Continuation of accreditation with condition/s
Does not meet minimum standards Does not adequately meet the minimum standards necessary to ensure that fitness of programme purpose will be achieved.	Withdrawal of accreditation

4.5   HEQC RATIFICATION OF RE-ACCREDITATION OUTCOMES

The National Review Committee scrutinises draft panel reports and makes recommendations in respect of re-accreditation to the HEQC. The HEQC makes re-accreditation decisions based on panels' draft reports and recommendations from the National Review Committee.

The relevant report with its accreditation outcome is then released to each institution. The institution has 21 working days within which to make representation to the HEQC based on the findings of the report. In this representation the institution may clarify its position relative to the HEQC report and re-accreditation outcome. Additional evidence may be provided to support claims already made.

In the case of institutional comment being submitted, the HEQC will respond by following the required process and procedure:

- A reviewer appointed by the CHE reviews the relevant report and the re-accreditation decision in light of the institutional representation.
- The reviewer's recommendation is considered by the National Review Committee which makes its recommendation to the HEQC.

- After reviewing all relevant documentation, the HEQC make its decision on the outcome which is then communicated to the institution.

The decision of the HEQC is final and binding on the institution.

4.6 IMPROVEMENT PLANS IN RESPECT OF PROGRAMMES THAT DO NOT ACHIEVE FULL ACCREDITATION

The outcome of the national review process informs the improvement plan requirements. A programme that exceeds or meets the minimum standards retains its accreditation status. However, a programme accredited with conditions or one that is placed on notice of withdrawal of accreditation is required to meet stipulated conditions within a specified timeframe. Institutions offering such a programme are required to report to the HEQC on the status of improvement to the programme.

All improvement plans received by the HEQC are subject to evaluation. The HEQC assumes responsibility for monitoring the fulfilment of all stipulated conditions before full accreditation is granted. The HEQC may extend the deadline by which conditions are met and can, in the interest of quality provision, issue a notice of intention to withdraw accreditation of the programme.

4.8 PUBLICATION OF OUTCOMES

All national review processes and committee proceedings are confidential. However, outcomes are made public and HEQC decisions with underlying reasons will be published on the CHE website.

5 PREPARATION OF THE REPORT ON THE STATE OF PROVISION OF THE PROGRAMME

The HEQC prepares a national report on the state of provision of the programme. A reference group of experts and relevant stakeholders will be appointed for this purpose. The report draws on:

- outcomes of the national review process;
- an analysis of the results of the review in relation to each of the criteria;
- the baseline data obtained from the survey carried out during the preparatory phase;
- self-evaluations submitted by institutions;
- the HEQC re-accreditation reports and decisions on re-accreditation;
- other relevant statistics and documentation.

The report focuses on the results of the national review process against the background of the history of its offering at higher education institutions. It maps the distribution of the programme onto the South African higher education landscape and analyses the performance of the programme in relation to the re-accreditation criteria across institutions. It highlights and analyses issues of concern emerging from the national review process and identifies trends in the programme. In addition to identifying areas for further consideration or in-depth analysis, the report also identifies good practices.

The National Review Committee will comment on the report before it is submitted to the HEQC for approval.