Framework for
National Review
of programmes in Higher Education

This Framework sets out principles, policy, agency and general procedure for national reviews of higher education programmes. Specific details, including what is required of the institutions offering the programme(s) under review, are contained in a ***National Review Manual*** that accompanies each review.

Contents

Abbreviations

CHE	Council on Higher Education
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HEQC	Higher Education Quality Committee
HEQSF	Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework
FQSHE	Framework for Qualification Standards in Higher Education
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NRC	National Review Committee
QC	Quality Council
SAQA	South African Qualification Authority
SER	Self-Evaluation Report

Foreword

The Higher Education Act (No. 101 of 1997, as amended) assigns responsibility for quality assurance in higher education in South Africa to the Council on Higher Education (CHE). This responsibility is discharged through its permanent sub-committee, the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC). 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. The Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) is the Sub-Framework of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) dedicated to higher education.

The mandate of the HEQC includes quality promotion and capacity development, institutional audits, standards development, accreditation and re-accreditation of programmes, and national reviews. HEQC has executive responsibility for quality assurance decisions, including decisions in respect of a national review.

The HEQC's approach to quality assurance is largely shaped by the complex challenges facing higher education institutions in South Africa. The approach seeks to be responsive and proactive in advancing the higher education transformation agenda as reflected in various national legislative imperatives since 1994, and also to ensure improved and sustainable quality.

In 2009 the HEQC conducted an extensive evaluation of its quality assurance policies and procedures. The outcome of the evaluation resulted in significant revision to its role as Quality Council. The revision is represented in recently approved frameworks, such as the Framework for Institutional Quality Enhancement in the Second Period of Quality Assurance (CHE, 2014), Framework for Qualification Standards in Higher Education (FQSHE) (CHE 2013), Accreditation Framework (CHE, 2015), and this Framework. These revised frameworks emphasise the point that the processes are closely inter-related and inform one another.

A further indication of the integral nature of these quality assurance processes is the merger of two previously separate directorates (Standards Development and National Reviews) into a single Directorate of National Standards and Reviews. This Directorate coordinates and administers national reviews of programmes.

This Framework sets out the evaluation and re-accreditation policy for programmes identified for national review. Since approval of an original framework for national review in September 2012, there have been two major developments affecting the approach to national reviews. One is the implementation of the HEQSF gazetted in October 2014. The other is progress by the CHE in development of standards for higher education qualifications.

The development of qualification standards adds a new dimension to the policy for national review of programmes. National qualification standards provide both compliance benchmarks and developmental indicators for qualification types as awarded in particular

fields of study or disciplines. They serve an important function as part of the national review process, in that the standard provides a benchmark for the purpose of the qualification and the graduate attributes that manifest it; thus the standard is important for both a national assessment of a qualification and for confirming the accreditation of individual programmes leading to the award of the qualification. This approach represents a cyclical process, from a national qualification benchmark, through the programmes offered by individual institutions, and reflection back on the national perspective revealed by a composite analysis and evaluation of the programmes reviewed. Thus the provisions of the HEQSF are closely linked, in respect of quality assurance, with the specific programme offerings of higher education institutions.

The national review process is aligned with the programme accreditation system which evaluates new programmes and existing programmes. The fundamental aims of a national review are to ensure that minimum standards in programmes are met, that students are protected from programmes that do not meet minimum quality standards and that public confidence in higher education programmes is assured. To be re-accredited, programmes need to meet the national qualification standard and the programme-level criteria.

Dr Denyse Webbstock
Acting CEO

1. National Policy and the Legislative Context

Quality assurance is the responsibility of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) which is a permanent sub-committee of the Council on Higher Education (CHE), established by the Higher Education Act, 1997 (Act No. 101 of 1997). The CHE is also the Quality Council for Higher Education as established by the National Qualifications Framework Act, 2008 (Act No. 67 of 2008) (NQF). 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; and
- 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; and
- 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 (1997)*, the *National Plan for Higher Education of 2001* (NPHE) and, more recently, the amended NQF legislation, as it affects the role and function of the CHE.

According to the NQF Act, a Quality Council (QC) 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); and

- conduct research on matters pertaining to its Sub-Framework.

While the NQF Act provides for the QC to delegate certain functions under certain conditions, in terms of the Higher Education Act, 1997 (Act 101 of 1997) as amended, the CHE may not delegate its quality assurance functions beyond its sub-committee, the HEQC. 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 quality assurance decisions, including decisions in respect of national review. 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. Decisions of the HEQC are based on peer evaluation and expert review processes.

Since approval of an original framework for national review in September 2012 there have been two major developments affecting the approach to national reviews. One is the implementation of the revised Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) gazetted in October 2014. The HEQSF establishes the suite of qualification types and type-variants that may be awarded in higher education. The other is progress by the CHE in development of standards for higher education qualifications. As the HEQSF states,

> *The development of standards is an important element in contributing to the successful implementation of the HEQSF, as standards provide benchmarks to guide the development, implementation and quality assurance of programmes leading to qualifications. Standards registered for higher education qualifications must have legitimacy, credibility and a common, well-understood meaning… [T]he CHE will ensure that there are appropriate safeguards to ensure the integrity of standards development and quality assurance processes respectively.*
>
> (HEQSF, p 13, #16)

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. The sector 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 the 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 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 quality assurance processes, both external and internal.

The Framework also takes into account challenges relating to the need to increase the pool of basic and applied knowledge to enhance understanding, social and economic development, as well as opportunities emerging from new educational technology and modes of delivery, to adapt and innovate academic programmes, thereby enhancing graduate attributes and skills needed for national human resource development.

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.

Resulting from an extensive evaluation of its quality assurance principles and procedures applied during the first period (2004 – 2010, referred to above), the CHE has conducted a review of its activities, taking into account its own mandate, national priorities, as well as the best interests of provider institutions, their students and graduates, and the contexts for which the graduates are prepared. This has resulted in significant revision to its role as the Quality Council for higher education. The revision is represented in recently approved frameworks, such as the *Framework for Institutional Quality Enhancement in the Second Period of Quality Assurance* (CHE, 2014), *Framework for Qualification Standards in Higher Education* (FQSHE) (CHE 2013), *Accreditation Framework* (CHE, 2015), and *Framework for National Review of Programmes leading to Qualifications on the HEQSF* (CHE, 2015). These revised frameworks emphasise the point that the processes are closely inter-related and inform one another.

A further indication of the integral nature of these quality assurance processes is the merger of two previously separate directorates (Standards Development and National Reviews) into a single Directorate of National Standards and Reviews. This Directorate coordinates and administers national reviews of programmes.

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. (While the focus has been on undergraduate affairs, they clearly have implications for post graduate studies, and these implications need to be considered in context.)

Consequently, the second shift is towards a greater balance between improvement and accountability at the undergraduate level, without compromise in ensuring quality of educational provision across the system, and across all qualification levels on the HEQSF.

3. Principles underpinning a National Review

The following principles guide the national review model.

- 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.

- Higher education institutions (HEIs) must demonstrate their capacity to offer programmes of acceptable quality at the higher education level that meet the standards and criteria designed to promote such quality before they may be offered.

- HEIs must also, as required from time to time, be able to provide evidence of their capacity to deliver and sustain programmes being offered.

- The HEQC's responsibility is to maintain a robust external system of programme accreditation that can validate institutional information on the effectiveness of 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 qualification standards and accreditation criteria for programmes, which ensures transparent, credible and consistent decision-making on the quality of programmes and institutional capacity.

4. The general objectives of a National Review

The general objectives of a national review are to:

- assure and enhance the quality of higher education programmes and institutions by identifying and granting recognition status to programmes that satisfy the HEQC's 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 inter-related 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 threshold standards, and to recognise such achievements; and

- increase the confidence of the public in higher education programmes and qualifications.

5. The specific purpose of a National Review

National review of higher education programmes has a seven-fold purpose, comprising:

1) establishment of a threshold standard for the qualification to which the programmes lead and against which they are benchmarked;

2) evaluation of each programme in terms of its meeting the qualification standard;

3) quality assurance of each programme in terms of institutional resources for the design, delivery and desired output of the programme;

4) identification, as the case may be, of areas of above-threshold performance, areas that call for improvement, and areas that fall seriously short of the threshold;

5) provision of opportunities, as required, for short- and longer-term processes of programme development and improvement;

6) taking the factors above into account, systematically confirming accreditation, conditional re-accreditation or withdrawal of accreditation of programmes; and

7) production of an evaluative report on the national state of the qualification as revealed by the programmes leading to the qualification.

These aspects of a national review represent a cyclical process, from a national qualification benchmark, through the programmes offered by individual institutions, and reflecting back on the national perspective revealed by a composite analysis and evaluation of the programmes. Thus the provisions of the HEQSF are closely linked, in respect of quality assurance, with the specific programme offerings of the institutions.

6. The Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework

The expanded CHE mandate includes the development of standards for qualifications in higher education. The development of qualification standards adds a new dimension to the policy for national review of programmes.

National qualification standards provide both compliance benchmarks and developmental indicators for qualification types as awarded in particular fields of study or disciplines. They serve an important function as part of the national review process, in that the standard provides a benchmark for the purpose of the qualification and the graduate attributes that manifest it; thus the standard is important for both a national assessment of a qualification and for confirming the accreditation of individual programmes leading to the award of the qualification.

6.1 The qualification standard[1]

It is important, at the outset, to distinguish clearly between qualification standards and other kinds of standard applied in higher education.

There are clear distinctions between **qualification** standards … and other fundamentally different kinds of standards sometimes employed by higher education, for example, content standards, teaching and learning standards, standards for the assessment of student achievement, and standards for institutional performance. A qualification standard is largely determined by the purpose and characteristics of a qualification type. It is a generic statement of the learning domains, the level of achievement and the graduate attributes that characterise, and are required for the award of, the qualification.

---

[1] The Accreditation Framework (2014) uses the term 'minimum standards' as a sub-category of the 'criteria' for accreditation. The use of the term in each framework is quite distinctive. Whereas 'standards' applied to accreditation refer to specific aspects of a programme offered, qualification standards apply to the national qualification on the HEQSF in a particular field of study or discipline.

As generic statements of achievement, qualification standards apply to all programmes leading to the award of the qualification type. Given the range and diversity of knowledge fields, disciplines and professions that comprise higher education, and their distinctive blends of learning domains and required achievements, it is necessary for generic qualification-type standards to be interpreted, articulated and applied according to the particular character of the field, discipline or profession. The Council, in consultation with relevant academic and, where relevant, professional experts, develops these specific applications.

(FQSHE, 2013, p 8, #2.1)

6.2 Development of the standard

To develop the qualification standard, the CHE convenes a working group of academics from higher education institutions (HEIs) with expertise in the particular field of study, normally after consultation with a representative academic body or association. A standard is drafted according to the policy and provisions of the *Framework for Qualification Standards in Higher Education* (CHE, 2013). In the case of professional qualifications, a draft endorsed by the working group is made available to relevant professional bodies or associations and, in the case of all qualifications for which standards have been developed, to HEIs, for comment and recommendations. Once the process of consultation has been completed and all concerns have been addressed, the standard is presented to the HEQC for approval. The development of a standard for the qualification is an essential precursor to a national review of programmes leading to the award of the qualification.

6.3 Evaluation of programmes in terms of the standard

Besides locating the qualification on the HEQSF and aligning it with the level descriptors on the NQF, the standard seeks to address four fundamental questions.

- What is the ***purpose*** of the qualification?
- What are the threshold ***attributes of a graduate*** who is awarded the qualification (knowledge, skills, and capacity to apply competence in authentic situations)?
- How do those attributes ***reflect the purpose***?
- In what contexts and under what conditions are that attributes to be ***assessed***?

As the *Framework for Qualification Standards in Higher Education* states,

> *Their role is to provide benchmarks, agreed on by academic experts, to inform and guide the design, approval and, where required, the improvement of programmes leading to the award of qualifications … Standards development is a necessary aspect of implementation of the HEQSF. One of its aims is to enhance public perceptions of consistency between similar qualifications offered by different institutions and in different fields of study. The standard states what a programme leading to the qualification type intends to achieve and how we can establish that it has been achieved. This would assure a nationally agreed and internationally comparable fitness for purpose. Standards aim to provide institutions with benchmarks for qualifications that may be used for internal quality assurance as well as external comparison.*
> (FQSHE, p. 6, #1.2)

The standard includes guidelines that clarify aspects of, and concepts or terms used in the standard statement.

It is equally important to note what the standard does not determine. To ensure that contextual diversity and institutional autonomy are recognised, the standard does not prescribe actual programme design, modes and methods of delivery, or assessment policies and practice. These matters are addressed through other means, as described below.

The standard is also intended to ensure international comparability. In the case of some qualifications, comparability is informed by international accords to which a national professional body is a signatory or by an international benchmark which a national association has informally endorsed. In other cases, comparability depends on the expertise of the academic working group that develops the standard and input from HEIs.

A national review takes into account the likelihood that, in most cases, programmes have been accredited and delivered well before the qualification standard has been developed. For this reason, the process described below provides opportunity for HEIs to identify, where relevant, aspects of the standard that need to be addressed as an initial stage in the review process.

6.4 The standard and quality assurance of programmes

There is a close relationship between standards development and national reviews, on the one hand, and the quality assurance of institutional programmes, effected through the process of accreditation and re-accreditation, on the other. As the *Accreditation Framework* states,

Programme accreditation is one part of an interconnected quality assurance system, which includes, inter-alia:

- *Standards development, which involves the development, maintenance and improvement of qualification standards across the higher education system. Programme accreditation involves the application of standards in the decision-making process about the quality of the proposed or current programmes and the fitness of institutions to offer the higher education programmes …*

- *National review, which involves the re-accreditation of programmes and qualifications in particular disciplinary fields offered across the higher education sector in a particular time period. (Accreditation Framework, 2014, p. 7)*

The close relationship between various quality assurance processes is also reflected in the definition of 'student success' in the *Framework for Institutional Quality Enhancement in the Second Period of Quality Assurance* (CHE, 2014): *'Enhanced student learning with a view to increasing the number of graduates with attributes that are personally, professionally and socially valuable.'* These complementary and inter-connected processes together represent a continuum of external quality assurance, ranging from those that have a hard accountability focus such as programme accreditation, to those that, while addressing accountability, are also developmental in orientation, such as institutional audits, national reviews and standards development. As the *Framework for Qualification Standards in Higher Education* states,

> *Criteria for accreditation of a programme leading to a qualification include the requirement to demonstrate the programme's fitness, intellectual credibility, coherence and capacity for articulation (HEQC, 2004, Criterion 1). There is little doubt that these qualities are central to any notion of standards in higher education. Would criteria for programme accreditation not, then, cover much of the ground that standards might embrace? There are some important differences. Requirements for accreditation are very generally stipulated, and do not give any explicit guide to potential providers or to the judges of proposed new programmes. In applications, responses to Criterion 1 are adjudicated by knowledgeable peers, but, in the absence of more explicit benchmarks, these cover a wide range of possibilities and disputes become tricky to arbitrate. Far from being simply adjuncts to existing criteria for accreditation, standards aim to establish the core credentials of qualifications and, as such, they are intended to make the process of programme accreditation – as well as review, whether internal or external to institutions – better benchmarked, and thus more transparent and even-handed. However, the development of standards and the application of criteria for accreditation are not mutually exclusive matters.*

> (FQSHE, p. 14, #5.3)

While the primary aspect of a national review is an assessment of the extent to which the qualification awarded meets the national standard as defined above, an associated aspect is a detailed assessment of the institutional programme leading to the qualification: access to the programme, programme design, fitness for and of purpose, human and physical resources necessary for quality provision, modes and methods of delivery, assessment policy and practice, throughput and graduation rates, provision for internal review and development, and other relevant issues. This aspect is informed by the criteria set out in *Criteria for Programme Accreditation* (CHE, 2014). Matters emerging from a national review that need to be considered at an institutional level may be addressed further through the institutional quality enhancement process.

While all the accreditation criteria are relevant and are taken into account, qualifications in different fields of study and disciplines may have distinctive sets of priorities and concerns that call for the relative prioritisation of some criteria over others.[2] Furthermore, the criteria are adapted to be aligned with the distinctive details of the qualification standard. For these reasons, the accreditation criteria may be adapted to provide special focus on such priorities, concerns and prerequisites.

In the first instance, the scope, qualification standard and accreditation criteria specific to a particular programme review, are proposed by a reference group composed of field or discipline experts in the higher education academic community. The group is selected by the CHE from nominations received from the affected institutions. It may also consider nominations from a representative academic body. After consultation with the reference group, the Directorate of National Standards and Reviews (the Directorate) submits the proposal to the National Reviews Committee (NRC) for its consideration. The NRC endorses or amends the proposal and, in turn, presents it to the HEQC for approval. This ensures that the HEQC has approved the scope and criteria on which its decision-making will be based. Matters brought to the attention of the CHE by affected professional bodies and associations may also be taken into account, provided that they impinge directly on the qualification standard and are not extraneous to it.

The scopes of the review and proposed criteria for re-accreditation, drafted accordingly, are submitted to the affected HEIs for comment and, possibly, further modification before they are confirmed by the HEQC. They form the basis for institutional self-evaluation reports and the proceedings of review panels, as set out fully in the manual that accompanies each national review.

---

[2] Priority areas are likely to vary between qualifications that are primarily vocational, professional or general in character. For example, there are likely to be differences between qualifications in the presence and importance of, as well as scope and methods applied to, work-integrated learning. Another example would be differences in priority areas between qualifications awarded through coursework and those that are fundamentally research-related.

7. The function of the National Review Committee

The NRC is a standing sub-committee of the HEQC. 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 NRC include the following:

• recommend possible areas of national review to the CHE;

• provide support and advice on the efficient and effective implementation of the national review system;

• recommend to the HEQC its approval of the scope of the review, procedures and criteria for re-accreditation;

• evaluate draft review panel reports for their consistency and tone;

• recommend to the HEQC outcomes in respect of each programme reviewed;

• analyse institutional improvement plans for their coverage and thoroughness in addressing recommendations for the programme;

• review progress reports to confirm that improvement plans have been implemented and completed, and recommend to the HEQC that the review process for an institution can be concluded, or that further engagement with an institution is required;

• provide guidance on the national report following completion of the review; and

• raise systemic issues which may arise out of the national review process for the attention of the HEQC.

In carrying out its work, the NRC 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.

8. The review process

8.1 Identifying programmes for a national review

In reaching its decision to undertake a national review of a particular qualification, the CHE takes into account factors such as: identified areas of national need; significant academic developments within the field or discipline; 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 one or more of the programmes leading to the qualification; 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.

8.2 Development and approval of a proposal for a national programme review

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

- selection of the programme to be re-accredited; consultation with providers, experts, peers and other relevant stakeholders in the relevant field/discipline regarding the planned national review;

- nomination and selection of academic experts in the field/discipline to establish a reference group for the purpose of proposing the scope of the review and the criteria for re-accreditation. The group may include international as well as local discipline experts;

- collection and analysis of background information and baseline data to inform the review process, including the programmes to be reviewed, and relevant information such as student enrolment, throughput and graduation rates;

- a review of local and international literature to identify and analyse reports and studies on any quality assurance processes relevant to the discipline or field; and

- dissemination to participating institutions of the proposed scope and criteria for comment.

The outcome of this process is a NRC recommendation to the HEQC for approval of the scope of the review and the criteria to be applied.

8.3 Institutional self-evaluation of a 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 institutional self-evaluation of the identified programme against the standard and the published criteria.

The compilation of the self-evaluation report (SER) requires the department/unit offering the programme to engage in critical self-evaluation leading to evidence-based claims on the achievement of the standard and compliance with the criteria, the identification of

areas of good practice, areas for improvement, and any other interventions which might be required to sustain or enhance the quality of the programme.

In cases where an institution identifies its programme as falling short of the qualification standard and thus being in need of development – either as a whole or in respect of specific aspects of the standard – the self-evaluation report should include steps that are being taken or will be taken to address the issues. The report should also propose timelines within which the necessary steps might be accomplished. These timelines may be approved or, after further consultation, amended by the HEQC.

The institutional SER is subjected to a desktop evaluation by the CHE. The main purpose of this evaluation is to compare the programme with the national qualification standard and to identify areas of good practice and shortcomings. It may recommend areas in need of attention, but it does not include any recommendation in respect of accreditation.

The evaluation report is sent to the HEI, which may, during the forthcoming site visit, provide further information by way of clarification, or elaborate on plans for development.

8.4 Planning for site visits

The next stage of the process comprises a site-based peer evaluation of the programme. The CHE proceeds with the following steps:

- invites HEIs to submit nominations for the appointment of expert peer-review panel members to conduct institutional site visits (the CHE may add to the nomination list);
- selects and convenes the panels;
- considers any objections in respect of panel membership made by institutions on the grounds of conflict of interest;
- arranges for the training of review panels and report writers;
- makes all relevant documentation available to panellists, including the SER and desktop evaluator's report; and
- plans a schedule of site visits, and communicates details to the institutions concerned.

Panellists are required to sign declarations of confidentiality, and of any potential conflict of interest.

The chair or designated person in the review panel prepares a draft report after each site visit and submits this to the CHE. This is a holistic report based on both the institutional self-evaluation report and peer judgements emanating from the site visit. The panel may recommend endorsement of, or it may amend or add to the institutional account of improvement areas, and may recommend different timelines.

8.5 Peer-review decision-making and outcomes

Members of review panels have the responsibility to apply their discipline and subject knowledge in making appropriate judgements within the context of the programme being evaluated. The extent to which the programme meets the standard and the criteria 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 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 CHE, 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.

8.6 HEQC ratification of outcomes

The NRC scrutinises and assesses the panel reports, together with the institutional SER, the prior evaluation report and any other relevant documentation. It recommends an accreditation outcome to the HEQC.

Prior to making a decision, the HEQC makes the recommendation submitted by the NRC available to the institution, together with the report by the NRC on which the recommendation is based. Should it wish to do so, the institution may make representation within a period determined by the HEQC. In this representation the institution may seek correction of factual information affecting the findings in the report. Additional evidence may be provided to support claims already made, provided it is designed to clarify existing claims and is not used to introduce new ones.

A representation is scrutinised and evaluated by an expert appointed by the CHE, who reports to the NRC. Based on the report, the NRC confirms or reviews its original recommendation to the HEQC. Based on all the evidence provided by the NRC, the institution, the review panel and any other relevant documentation, the HEQC decides on the outcome. The decision by the HEQC is then conveyed to the relevant institution. The decision is final and binding on the institution.

8.7 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:

· Accreditation confirmed, with commendation
The qualification standard and all programme criteria are met and, in addition, examples of good practice and innovation are identified in relation to the standard and several criteria.

· Accreditation confirmed
Qualification standard and programme criteria are met.

· Re-accreditation subject to meeting specified conditions
A programme does not yet meet the qualification standard and criteria. Shortcomings are within the capacity of the academic unit and/or institution, and can be remedied within a reasonable period.

· Programme on notice of withdrawal of accreditation
The programme has significant weaknesses such that it falls short of the qualification standard and does not meet criteria relating to programme design, teaching and learning, or assessment, so that the achievement of required graduate attributes is crucially compromised. However, presented with a description of shortcomings in the programme and steps that must be taken to address the shortcomings, the institution has the capacity thoroughly to review its programme and, through an improvement plan, comply with the standard and criteria.

· Accreditation withdrawn
The programme has fundamental weaknesses such that it falls well short of the qualification standard and does not meet the criteria, so that alignment of the programme with the purpose of the qualification and the related graduate attributes is unachievable.

8.8 Improvement plans in respect of programmes that do not achieve unconditional 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, which may be short- or long-term. Institutions offering such a programme are required to report from time to time to the NRC on progress made in respect of improvement to the programme.

All improvement plans and progress reports received by the NRC are subject to evaluation. The NRC may at its discretion and for good reason request the Directorate to arrange a follow-up site visit if it is of the view that that would be an appropriate way of monitoring progress.

In cases where the timelines for conditions to be met are not adhered to, or it becomes clear that the conditions are not being adequately addressed, the HEQC may, on recommendation by the NRC, alter a decision of 'accreditation subject to conditions' to a notice of withdrawal, or, where a programme is already on notice of withdrawal to confirmation of withdrawal.

8.9 Identification of above-threshold practice

A national review aims to be a means not only of quality control, but also of quality development throughout the relevant academic sector. On the one hand, the review seeks to identify and acknowledge areas of above-threshold policy and practice which might be shared among the entire academic community, to the benefit of the qualification at a national level and, where required, enhance its international comparability

.

8.10 Publication of outcomes

Final decisions by the HEQC are published on the CHE website.

9. Report on the national state of the qualification

Of equal importance in a national review to the quality assurance of programmes and provision of opportunities for development and improvement, is an evaluation of the composite national picture in respect of the qualification. To this end, the CHE produces and publishes a report addressing the main findings, strengths, shortcomings and concerns emerging from the review as a whole. Examples of main topics follow.

To what extent is the national standard being met? Are there any discrepancies between the national standard and programme diversity? Is the overall graduate output addressing national needs (qualitatively and quantitatively)? In the interests of national quality enhancement, are there instances of above-threshold policy and practice that should be identified and fostered in the sector as a whole? In cases of significant and widespread areas in need of improvement, is improvement within the capacity of individual HEIs, or within the capacity of the sector as a whole, or beyond its capacity and in need of address by other agencies? What recommendations does the CHE make towards the general enhancement of programmes leading to the qualification?

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 reports and decisions; and

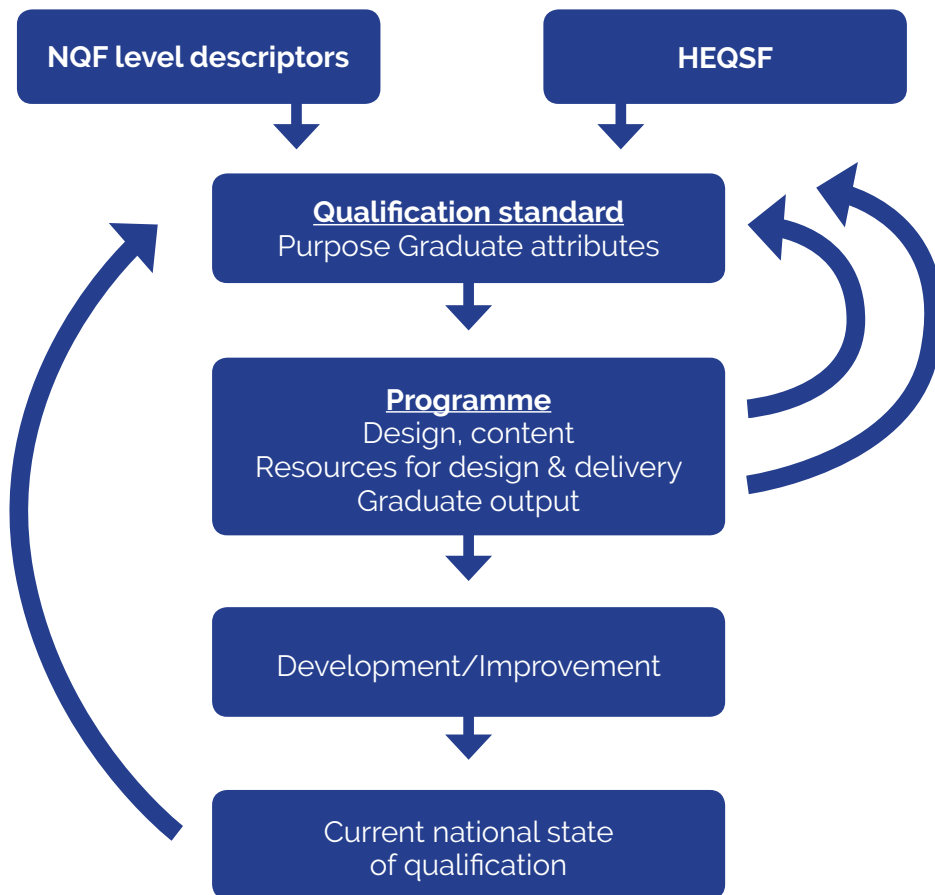- other relevant statistics and documentation.

Trends and patterns are highlighted, but individual institutions are not identified unless an institution specifically permits it.

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 established quality assurance standards and criteria. The aim of the report is not only to evaluate the current quality of the qualification reviewed, but also to promote quality enhancement in respect of areas where the collective evidence accumulated from the national review suggests that it is called for.

10. Conclusion

This Framework should be read in conjunction with the other quality assurance frameworks published by the CHE, and with the National Review Manual relevant to the particular programme review. An integrated approach to the quality assurance responsibilities of the CHE, of which programme reviews form a part, will enhance accomplishment of the intentions of HEQSF. Thus, the Framework guides the process of developing the review proposal, the review itself, and its outcomes.

Diagrammatic representation of the process

```
┌─────────────────────────┐        ┌─────────────────────────┐
│   NQF level descriptors │        │          HEQSF          │
└───────────┬─────────────┘        └───────────┬─────────────┘
            │                                  │
            ▼                                  ▼
      ┌────────────────────────────────────────────┐
      │        Qualification standard              │◄─┐
      │        Purpose Graduate attributes         │  │
      └───────────────────┬────────────────────────┘  │
                          │                            │
                          ▼                            │
      ┌────────────────────────────────────────────┐  │
      │                Programme                   │  │
      │             Design, content                │──┘
      │        Resources for design & delivery     │
      │              Graduate output               │
      └───────────────────┬────────────────────────┘
                          │
                          ▼
      ┌────────────────────────────────────────────┐
      │          Development/Improvement           │
      └───────────────────┬────────────────────────┘
                          │
                          ▼
      ┌────────────────────────────────────────────┐
      │           Current national state           │
      │             of qualification               │
      └────────────────────────────────────────────┘
```

References

Council on Higher Education. 2014. *Framework for Institutional Quality Enhancement in the Second Period of Quality Assurance.* CHE: Pretoria
http://www.che.ac.za/media_and_publications/frameworks-criteria/framework-institutional-quality-enhancement-second-period

Council on Higher Education. 2013. *Framework for Qualification Standards in Higher Education.* CHE: Pretoria
http://www.che.ac.za/media_and_publications/frameworks-criteria/second-draft-framework-qualification-standards-higher

Council on Higher Education. 2013. *The Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework as revised January 2013 and final amendments put in 25 July 2013.* CHE: Pretoria
http://www.che.ac.za/focus_areas/higher_education_qualification_sub_framework/

Council on Higher Education. *2013. Framework for National Review of Programmes leading to Qualifications on the HEQSF.* CHE: Pretoria
http://www.che.ac.za/media_and_publications/legislation/government-gazette-higher-education-qualifications-sub-framewor-0

Council on Higher Education. 2014. Framework for Institutional Quality Enhancement in the Second Period of Quality Assurance. CHE: Pretoria
http://www.che.ac.za/media_and_publications/frameworks-criteria/quality-enhancement-project-qep-process

Department of Education. 1997. Higher Education Act, 1997 (Act No. 101 of 1997).
Department of Education: Pretoria
http://www.acts.co.za/higher-education-act-1997/index.html

Department of Education. 1997. White Paper 3: *A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education.* DOE: Pretoria
http://www.education.gov.za/DocumentsLibrary/Legislation/WhitePapers/tabid/191/Default.aspx

Department of Education. 2001. *National Plan for Higher Education.* Department of Education: Pretoria
http://www.dhet.gov.za/Gazette/Gazette%20no%2037928,Notice%20681%20of%20 2014,Department%20of%20Higher%20Education%20and%20Training.pdf

HEQC. 2009. *External Evaluation of the Higher Education Quality Committee of the Council on Higher Education, South Africa*. CHE: Pretoria
http://www.che.ac.za/media_and_publications/accreditation/external-evaluation-report-higher-education-quality-committee

South African Qualifications Authority. 2008. National Qualifications Framework Act, 2008 (Act No. 67 of 2008) (NQF). SAQA: Pretoria
http://www.acts.co.za/index.html?national_qualifications_framework_act_2008.php