

## Quality Assurance in Higher Education: A Case Study of the Vaal University of Technology

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### Abstract

*The Vaal University of Technology (hereafter VUT) ensures that the University applies the three elements of quality assurance. Attempts have been made in this paper to define quality in different contexts and specifically how quality is processed at the VUT. Quality is ensured by participation and representation in structures and processes and by understanding how the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) functions in the setting of standards and quality qualifications. The subject of standards has produced much legislation and many policies and documents, but the authors argue that the recommendations in these documents are not always implemented. With regard to relevance, it is noted that quality assurance in higher education is important because of the rapid expansion of higher education systems.*

**Keywords:** Quality Assurance, Higher Education, Standards, Quality and Relevance.

### 1. Introduction

This paper discusses a view on quality assurance in higher education, and will argue that quality, standards and relevance are important in higher education. The paper will further differentiate between quality, standards and relevance. After the discussion and interpretation, a conclusion will be drawn. The paper consists of a literature review of the relevant textbooks and articles. Primary and secondary source material will be subjected to critical analysis, which will give rise to the conclusion.

The first part of this paper defines the relevant concepts. The discussion finally shifts to the problem statement and the aims of this paper. A literature review on quality, standards and relevance will be conducted. Finally, the authors will give their findings on what they learned about the three elements of quality assurance, after which a conclusion will be drawn.

Vroeijenstijn referred to the term quality assurance in higher education as the systematic, structured and continuous attention to quality in terms of quality maintenance and improvement (Vroeijenstijn 1995:30). The interpretation of quality by the South African Qualification Authority (SAQA) is that it is the commitment to developing representative and participatory processes and structures in which a variety of views, thinking, practice and experience are brought to bear on the development and implementation of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) (South African Qualifications Authority 2000:3).

In order to achieve outcomes-based education and training in South Africa, standards for the units and qualifications registered on the NQF and quality assurance for learning and assessment are provided. Standards, quality, the NQF standards setting and quality assurance processes are built on the basic beliefs of:

- Knowledge, which is relevant for the present world, and is created through partnerships amongst diverse groupings in society, from academics and researchers to business, from workers to professional experts, from government to community organisations, from learners to professors. Therefore, knowledge creation is no longer the preserve of narrowly defined groups of "experts"; and
- The national system of education and training must balance the need for quality education for all citizens (which is also entrenched in South Africa's Constitution) with the need for flexibility in order to cater for the

wide-ranging circumstances that face learners, and the wide-ranging options for delivering what constitutes relevant credits and qualifications. Therefore, there must be a balance between society's needs and the needs of the individual (South African Qualifications Authority 2000:3).

The objectives of quality assurance according to SAQA are:

- Integration: it would be expected that qualifications and standards integrate theory, practice, skills, knowledge, values and attitudes.
- Learning outcomes: it would be expected that qualifications and standards clearly state the expected skills, knowledge, values and attitudes to be acquired and the level and standard expected of these in order to guide learners and facilitators of learning.
- Access, mobility and progression: it would be expected that qualifications and standards are designed in a way that ensures that they do not lead learners and students to a dead end but rather allow for continued learning and improved employment opportunities.
- Redress: it would be expected of qualifications and standards to ensure that the potential of citizens that were previously denied education and training opportunities is brought to the fore and recognised so that these citizens can be improved.
- Personal and National development: it would be expected that qualifications and standards ensure that learners are developed so that they can be responsible for their own social-political-economic development and for the reconstruction and development of the country (South African Qualifications Authority 2000:4).

The three elements of quality assurance are: quality, standards and relevance. According to the SAQA, the principle of relevance in an educationally sound environment means to be and to remain responsive to national development needs, with a perfect match between what is taught in schools and what is required for the working world. Standards are expressed in terms of a nationally agreed upon framework and internationally acceptable outcomes. According to the *SAQA Act* of 1995, standards can be defined as "registered statements of desired education and training outcomes and their associated assessment criteria". The experience of the majority of learners thus far has been of differences in standards across different institutions, sectors, enterprises, provinces and the fragmented national government departments. The objectives together with the principles (including standards and relevance) constitute quality (South African Qualifications Authority 2000:9).

The third understanding of quality is embedded in the implementation processes of the NQF. The NQF provides for the establishment and registration of education and training standards.

Based on the foregoing discussion, this paper looks at the three elements of quality assurance in higher education. To develop a logical argument, quality will first be discussed, and this discussion will be followed by an interrogation of standards. Finally, a discussion on relevance will be entered into. The following paragraph will discuss the problem statement which is currently a "hot" topic in education in South Africa.

## 2. Problem Statement

In order to address the problem of discrimination, universities have opened their doors to students of all races; they have transformed curricula so that they are more relevant to local circumstances. The new dispensation also drove more restructuring of higher education (International Education Association of South Africa (IEASA) 2013:12).

Issues of equity needed to be addressed. However there are still many aspects which have not yet been addressed. In 1993, more than 50% of all students were white, 40% were African, 6% coloured and 7% Indian. By 2005, the proportion of white students had shrunk to 25% and that of African students had grown to 61% (IEASA 2013:13).

Higher education in South Africa has a 45% drop-out rate, which undermines the gains achieved in access to universities. The students who are likely to drop out are those from low-income, less educated families. In order to address this problem, the Council on Higher Education (CHE) has extended the period of degree studies from three to four years (IEASA 2013:13).

Another problem that exists is the success rates of universities. Although the success rates are 74% for African, 76% for coloured, 81% for Indian and 85% for white undergraduates, there are only 15% of students who graduate. That is lower than the anticipated 25% that the government has suggested (IEASA 2013:14).

The problem of equity also occurs among staff members. Most employees are white, followed by African staff. Black people are in the majority in administration or service jobs. There have been efforts to attract young black academic professionals, but these professionals are lured away to the corporate and government sectors (IEASA 2013:15).

Research is also a problem in South Africa. Although South Africa is in the top 1% of the world institutions in producing research, there are only 9 158 Masters and PhD graduates, representing a low 7,2% (IEASA 2013:15).

Therefore this paper addresses the above-mentioned problems and how quality, standards and relevance can relieve these problems.

### 3. Aims of this Paper

The aims of this paper are to explore:

- The meaning of total quality and how it can be improved in higher education.
- How the drop-out rate can be decreased/totally erased by implementing the three elements of quality assurance, namely quality, standards and relevance.
- How the success rate can be increased.

### 4. Literature Review

#### 4.1 Quality

Before we discuss quality in higher education, the question we should ask ourselves is what is meant by "higher" in higher education? Higher education is not just about the higher-level educational structures in the country, but includes college and university teaching and learning, towards which students progress in order to attain higher educational qualifications. Higher education imparts in-depth knowledge and understanding that leads students and learners to new frontiers of knowledge in the different domains of life. Higher education is about learning more and more and realising that you know less and less. It develops the student's ability to question and seek the truth and to make him/her more competent to deliver critique on contemporary issues (National Assessment and Accreditation Council 2007:17).

Now that we have established what is meant by "Higher education" we can define quality. The Latin word for quality is *qualis* which means "what kind of". Pfeffer and Coote (1991:171) state that quality is a "slippery concept" owing to its elusive nature. The British Standards Institution defines quality as "the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs" (British Standards Institution 1991:1).

Harvey and Green (1993) identified five categories of ways of thinking about quality in higher education.

- Exception: distinctive, embodied in excellence, passing a minimum set of standards.
- Perfection: zero defects, getting things right the first time.
- Fitness for purpose: relates to quality for a purpose, defined by the provider.
- Value for money: a focus on efficiency and effectiveness, measuring outputs against inputs.
- Transformation: a qualitative change; education is about doing something for the students as opposed to something for the consumer (Harvey and Green 1993:18).

Garvin (1988) classified the various definitions of quality into five groups:

- Transcendent definitions – the definitions are subjective and personal.
- Product-based definitions – quality is seen as a measurable variable.
- User-based definitions - quality is a means for customer satisfaction.
- Manufacturing-based definition – quality is seen as conformance to requirements and specifications.
- Value-based definitions – quality is defined in relation to costs.

Out of the groups of definitions that have been provided on quality, the central ideas define quality as absolute, quality as a relative concept, quality as a process and quality as culture. These ideas can be explained as followed:

Quality is absolute, which means that it is given and considered as the highest possible standard. Work of high standard and quality can be seen in the "Mona Lisa" painted by Leonardo Da Vinci. Quality in product terms means that high "brand" values, status and positional advantages are attached to the products. Educational institutions such as Oxford and Cambridge have absolute quality standards. Quality as a relative concept suggests that the quality of a product or service can be described in relative terms, meaning that quality can be measured in terms of certain specifications. When quality is described as a process, it suggests that in order for a product or service to achieve quality, it must undergo certain processes and conform to procedural requirements. Finally, quality as a culture recognises the importance of an organisational view of quality as a process of transformation, where each entity is concerned with and acknowledges the importance of quality (National Assessment and Accreditation Council 2007:25).

Barnett (1991) defined quality in higher education as a "high evaluation accorded to an educative process, where it has been demonstrated that, through the process, the student's educational development has been enhanced... not only have they achieved the particular objectives set for the course, but in doing so, they have also fulfilled the general educational aims of autonomy, of the ability to participate in reasoned discourse, of critical self-evaluation, and of coming to proper awareness of the ultimate contingency of all thought and action" (Barnett 1991:16).

According to Watty (2003), quality in higher education reveals two schools of thought:

1. Attach quality to a context and as a consequence quality becomes meaningful. Therefore, references made to quality of assessment, student intake, academic programmes, teaching and learning, the student experience and programme designs are not uncommon.
2. Another way of thinking about quality relates to a stakeholder-specific meaning. In this school of thought quality is considered as having regard to a variety of stakeholders with an interest in higher education, each having the potential to think about quality in different ways (Watty 2003:5).

From the above discussion, the authors realise that the concept of quality is amorphous and contextual. It ranges from meaning "standards" to meaning "excellence". Quality can be seen as assessment in terms of a set of norm-referenced standards (see 4.2) that are built around what is expected at the minimum and beyond. On the other hand, quality is seen as excellence, similar to what Green and Harvey call exceptional. Excellence is a performance stage of exclusiveness and the highest level of satisfaction of the stakeholder.

The question that arises is: why do institutions want quality? There are many reasons why we need to think twice about quality. Some of these are:

- Competition: Within the new regime, there is a great deal of competition among educational institutions for students and funds are highly significant. Therefore, in order to survive this situation, educational institutions need to be concerned about their quality.
- Customer satisfaction: Students, parents or agencies that sponsor educational institutions are now highly conscious of their rights to get value for their money and time spent. These people demand good quality teaching and employable skill sets.
- Maintain standards: Educational institutions are concerned about setting their own standards and maintaining these standards continuously year after year.
- Accountability: Every institution is accountable to its stakeholders in terms of funds used. The concern for quality will ensure accountability for the funds utilised and inform the stakeholders about taking appropriate decisions.
- Improved employee morale and motivation: The concern for quality at an institution will improve the morale and motivation of the staff in performing their duties and responsibilities. Therefore, if a quality system is in place, the internal processes would be systematic, and in helping to develop internal customer satisfaction that leads to high morale and motivation.
- Credibility, prestige and status: When an institution is continuously, not intermittently, concerned about quality, it will bring credibility to individuals and to the institution.
- Image and visibility: Quality institutions have the capacity to attract better stakeholder support, such as, for instance, attracting merit students, increased donations/grants and higher employer interest, leading to easy placement of graduates (National Assessment and Accreditation Council 2007:26).

#### 4.1.1 Approach to quality assurance

There are different approaches to quality followed by quality assurance systems. The three main approaches are accreditation, assessment and audits (Kis 2005:5).

##### 4.1.1.1 Accreditation

The objectives of accreditation are captured in an ECSA document of August 2000 which provides an overview of these objectives, stated as follows:

- To establish whether or not a programme meets the educational requirement towards registration in a particular category;
- To establish whether the graduates of a programme are ready to enter employment and are equipped to continue learning throughout their careers;

- To establish the international comparability of programmes;
- To assure the public of the quality of the programme; and
- To encourage improvement and innovation in education in response to national and global needs (Marock 2000:13).

Accreditation is the evaluation of whether an institution or programme meets a threshold standard, and qualifies for a certain status. Obtaining accreditation may have implications for the higher education institution itself, as well as for the students (Kis 2005:5).

The countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) widely support the method of accreditation (Kis 2005:5). South Africa is one of the non-member economies with which the OECD has a working relationship, in addition to its other 30 member countries. South Africa was also invited to participate in the OECD's "Emerging Market Economy Forum" at its closure in 2000. The OECD Council at ministerial level adopted a resolution on 16 May 2007 to strengthen co-operation with South Africa, as well as Brazil, China, India and Indonesia, through a programme of enhanced engagement (OECD 2013:1).

In South Africa, the Higher Education Quality Committee accredits courses and does national reviews, quality promotion and capacity development (IEASA 2013:19).

The implications of accreditation are:

1. Many professions and institutions will not receive financial support from the professional council if they are not accredited to provide the programme.
2. In certain professions, accreditation impacts on the students. This can be seen in law students; for example, students may not write the examination towards registration if they have not completed their qualification with an accredited provider.
3. Many professional bodies list the institutions that are accredited, and therefore the accreditation impacts on the provider's ability to attract students to the programme.
4. Accreditation also impacts on recognition processes among Higher Education and Training institutions (Marock 2000:15).

There are implications for students if accreditation is removed from the provider. Withdrawal of accreditation takes place only after an institution has been given the opportunity to remedy the problems that have been identified. Where an institution has lost its accreditation, often by mutual agreement, a number of processes are put in place to protect the learners and students:

- Students in the institution which has lost its accreditation are able to complete the programme and access the same opportunities as those learners who are at accredited institutions.
- Students are able to enter a programme at an accredited institution.
- Students are able to write the national examination regardless of the institution where the learner is registered (Marock 2000:16).

#### 4.1.1.2 Assessment

Assessment is an evaluation that makes graded judgements about quality, which, according to Dill (2000), goes beyond accreditation that makes a binary judgement. Assessment asks: "How good are your outputs?" (Kis 2005:5). Quality assessment further refers to a number of measures of effectiveness and efficiency as defined by the various stakeholders in education and the representatives of the academic establishment (National Assessment and Accreditation Council 2007:100).

#### 4.1.1.3 Audit

A quality audit is concerned with processes and procedures. It is the systematic and independent examination to determine whether quality activities and related results comply with the planned arrangements and whether these arrangements are implemented effectively and are suitable to achieve the objectives (Bureau of Indian Standards 1988:1) that are set out by the SAQA. A quality audit checks the extent to which the institution is achieving its own explicit or implicit objectives. Academic audits are carried out at the institutional level (Kis 2005:6). The Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) conducts audits of universities in South Africa (IEASA 2013:19).

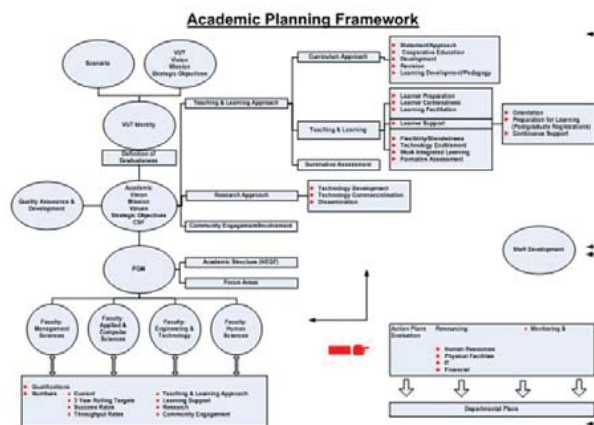
#### 4.1.2 The Vaal University of Technology's teaching and learning model and academic plan

There are some difficulties in implementing quality assurance because it needs more manpower/operations to maintain quality control. This adds more time to the initial process. This process also costs a lot of money (Answers 2013:1). The teaching and learning model and academic plan of the VUT (Vaal University of Technology), once it is approved at Senate, requires that each faculty and service department will develop its own implementation plan (Smit 2013:1). The aim of the strategy is to ensure the provision of:

- Education within a research-informed learning context, and curricula that are informed and delivered by staff working on cutting-edge research and scholarship and professional practice. This is also one of the issues that the VUT is in the process of addressing, and mentioned by the author in the problem statement.
- Multiple and flexible access routes to students into the programmes offered by the university.
- Support throughout the different access routes to students so as to facilitate success of the students.
- The opportunity provided to all students to fulfil their potential and develop the attributes and skills that are necessary for employment, effective and lifelong learning and global citizenship.
- Equitable, valid and consistently applied assessment (both formative and summative), together with helpful and timely feedback, within the University's regulatory framework (Smit 2013:1).

It can be seen that the above aims are in synergy with quality assurance in higher education, as mentioned above. The following diagram illustrates the implementation strategy:

Figure 1



In order to erase or decrease the drop-out rate at the VUT, also seen as one of the aims of this assignment, the students of VUT will have access to appropriate advice and guidance as part of the "first year experience". The VUT will achieve this by:

- supporting staff to engage appropriately with their students;
- clarifying the role of tutors to ensure that provision of academic support is available at departmental/module level;
- providing appropriate counselling and career guidance to students through:

##### 4.1.2.1 An appropriate application process, including:

- providing information
- providing career/academic advice
- profiling of students
- channelling in terms of options
- facilitating entrance to support and preparation programmes and options



#### 4.1.2.2 A well developed registration process that makes provision for:

- profiling of students
- career guidance
- registration

#### 4.1.2.3 Learning

- Teaching and Learning (including assessment)
- Mentoring
- Tutoring
- Communities of learning
- Continuous skills and Academic Development
- ICT supported learning
- Access to LMS
- Access to computers
- E-mail access
- Summer and winter schools (Smit 2013:6)

The above-mentioned steps could also increase the success rate, because the students would be well informed as to what is expected of them, and when they need information or help the students know that they can ask the tutors or lecturers. The students will also deal with technology (e-mails and ICT learning), which will prepare them for working life. The next paragraph will address standards as one of the three elements of quality assurance of higher education.

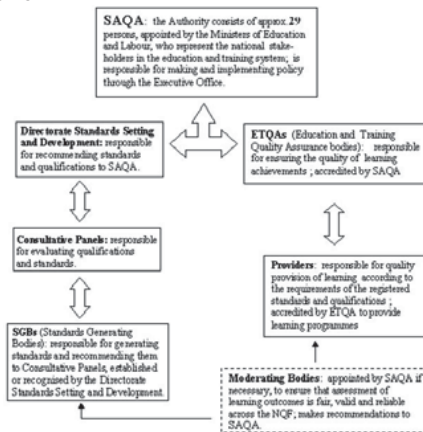
#### 4.2 Standards

Standards can be defined in terms of a minimum threshold by which performance is judged (Ashcroft and Foreman-Peck 1996:21). Standards are formally documented requirements and specifications against which performance can be assessed. Standards as a term can be used in quality assessment in the sense of a measure of processes, performance and outcomes that can be quantified on a continuum (Ashcroft and Foreman-Peck 1996:1). Therefore, the European Higher Education Network as well as the South African Qualification Authority state that institutions should have a policy and associated procedures for the assurance of the quality and standards of their programmes and awards. These institutions should also commit themselves explicitly to the development of a culture in which they recognise the importance of quality and quality assurance in their work. In order to achieve this, the institutions should develop and implement a strategy for the continuous enhancement of quality. These strategies, policy and procedures, which should include the role of students and learners as well as other stakeholders, should have a formal status and be publicly available (European Higher Education Area 2009:17).

Through the creation of Education and Training Quality Assurance bodies (ETQAs), the SAQA has recognised that delivery of the standards and qualifications is the preserve of professional providers and learners and other key stakeholders in the field. Different qualifications and standards will make different demands on curriculum development and delivery, on assessment and teaching. SAQA's concern is not in ensuring that all providers follow a national programme of delivery but rather in ensuring that the learners who are awarded a registered NQF-qualification or standard are able to demonstrate the learning outcomes of the qualification or standard in accordance with the described criteria and requirements. ETQAs will evaluate the learning programmes of different providers in a process of accreditation (seen in 4.1.1.1), thereby assuring learners and other users of the system that any learner who has been deemed competent after participating in that learning programme has displayed the learning outcomes required for that qualification or standard. The best group for ensuring that this will be the case is a body made up of representatives of stakeholders, active in the area of the qualification or standard, for example, the ETQA, which has that area as its primary focus. For that reason, in respect of its quality assurance functions, an ETQA must have national stakeholder representation at decision-making level, which will ensure public accountability and transparency (SAQA 2006:10).

The sub-structures in the setting of standards are the National Standards Bodies (NSBs) and the Standards Generating Bodies (SGBs), while the sub-structures in the quality assurance arm are the Education and Training Quality Assurance bodies (ETQAs). SAQA may choose to appoint moderating bodies if it deems it necessary (SAQA 2006:10).

Figure 2: Adapted from: SAQA 2006:13



The regulations of 1998 of the National Standards Bodies (NSBs) specify the following requirements for the registration of standards and unit standards:

- The specific outcomes must be assessed;
- The assessment criteria should include the essential embedded knowledge;
- The range statement should be included as a general guide for the scope, context and level being used for this unit standard; and
- A "notes" category must include the critical outcomes contemplated in the regulation that supported the unit standard, should include reference to essential embedded knowledge, and if this is not addressed under the assessment criteria, it may include other supplementary information on the unit standard.

There are certain requirements for the registration of qualifications, which should specify that the qualification should represent a planned combination of learning outcomes which has a defined purpose or purposes; have both specific and critical cross-field outcomes which promote lifelong learning; incorporate integrated assessment appropriately to ensure that the purpose of the qualification is achieved, and that such assessment must use a range of formative and summative assessment methods (section 8(1)(a) of the National Standards Bodies Regulation, 1998).

According to these requirements, it is evident that the fundamental method of communication between setting and attaining the learning standards or qualifications will be according to the format in which it is registered on the NQF. This is based on the necessity for linking assessment and accreditation policies and practices across these two functions of the NQF: standards setting and quality assurance (South African Qualifications Authority 2000:12).

The SAQA act and the regulation in terms of SAQA specify the accountability and the reporting claims for accredited bodies and the NSBs. The reporting requirements are directly concerned with the NQF registers, standards and qualifications. The Educational and Training Quality Assurance body (ETQA) is required to report on all learner enrolments and achievement of such registered standards and qualifications (South African Qualifications Authority 2000:13).

The channel for communication between standards setting and quality assurance processes is through the Authority. Basically, this means that ETQAs will make their submissions (of enrolments and achievements) to NSBs via the SAQA. This will ensure that the SAQA is able to co-ordinate and integrate the information across the bodies. This is especially critical in view of the fact that the fields of learning around which NSBs are constructed are different from the sectors within which ETQAs are accredited. Through the reporting mechanisms, NSBs will be dynamically updated on the impact and ongoing relevance of the registered standards and qualifications for which they are responsible. In order to fulfil the reporting requirements related to the specific standards and qualifications for whose quality assurance they are responsible, ETQAs will submit, at least, the following information to the SAQA on an annual basis:

#### 4.2.1 Quality Assurance

1. Learner take-up of standards and qualifications, for example the learner enrolments by standard or qualification;



2. Learner progress and achievements;
3. Appropriateness of learning outcomes to assessment criteria and integrative assessments in the case of qualifications not based on unit standards;
4. Access to additional or further education and training opportunities or employment opportunities for learners achieving the standards or qualifications;
5. Self-reviews and evaluations of quality management systems, policies and procedures in place amongst constituent providers; and
6. Proposals for new or amendments to registered standards or qualifications (South African Qualifications Authority 2000:15).

#### 4.2.2 The VUT

According to the new curriculum design, the scope and level of learning will be achieved through the HEQC programme accreditation criteria and also the level descriptors of the SAQA. The students will learn because the curriculum design pays attention to all types of learners, the delivery method is appropriate to all learners. Student feedback will help shape the future and will be achieved by:

- taking account of the results of national surveys of student opinion when planning for learning and teaching development;
- ensuring that there are appropriate mechanisms for the flow of information and feedback between students and staff;
- providing a proper Access Assessment strategy (profiling process) which will provide students with career guidance, address the enrolment issue mentioned above, as well as indicate what academic support a student may need;
- establishing an academic as well as a social orientation that will lead to better adjustment of students to the institutional culture, customs, values and higher learning ethos;
- creating enhanced learning opportunities to achieve increased success in learning;
- providing a competitive edge in the job market to our students through higher applied competences (Foundational, Practical and Reflexive competences), nurtured lifelong learning, teamwork and higher entrepreneurial competency; and
- contributing to the enhancement of students' technological and entrepreneurial role in society (Smit 2013:4).

This information will also address the problem in the problem statement that equity is not met in the workplace. By researching and taking the results of national surveys into consideration, the VUT can determine where it stands in relation to equity among students and staff, and address it accordingly.

Equity can also be addressed. Equity means the quality of being fair and impartial (Oxford Dictionaries 2013:1). Equity in education, or educational equity, means the study and achievement of fairness in education. Equity also deals with accommodation of and meeting the specific needs of citizens, but such specific needs will not result in equal treatment of students. The OECD in 2007 stated that educational equity has two dimensions: fairness, which is based on ability and application, and the right of individuals to basic functioning in literacy and numeracy (OECD 2007:1). Equality is addressed in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, where section 9(1) states: "Everyone is equal before the law".

Therefore, when applying "equity" in education, the authors are of the opinion that whether it relates to staff or students, the staff member who is better qualified in the specific field must be given the opportunity to prove him/herself in the workplace. If it relates to students, those students who work hard and achieve the desired outcome should be acknowledged, and if the learner is in matric, he/she should get the opportunity to prove him/herself at tertiary level.

#### 4.3 Relevance

Quality assurance is important because it is the main pillar of any educational institution. It helps in conducting evaluation processes like standards compliance evaluations, brand assurance evaluation, and customer or student experience evaluations (Ask.com 2013:1).

According to UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation), nearly half of all countries worldwide have created quality assurance mechanisms. The reason could be that, because of the rapid expansion of higher education systems, there is now a more diverse range of providers of higher education, comprising

public and private institutions, cross-border institutions and distance education organisations. Globalisation has also brought with it an increasing level of academic fraud, such as diploma mills, fly-by-night providers, bogus institutions or fake credentials. This increases the demand for trustworthy organisations that can establish confidence by using quality assurance methods. The quality of public higher education institutions has suffered in many countries owing to economic constraints and a shift in priorities from advanced to basic levels of education. There are strong expectations that quality assurance mechanisms will ensure continuous quality control and improvement. Quality assurance is linked to professional mobility, and a growing number of regional and international integration processes. This raises the need for more effective mechanisms for the professional recognition of higher education credentials (UNESCO 2013:1).

Quality assurance has two underlying broad objectives: control/accountability and improvement. Control/accountability relates to processes which assess whether minimum standards are in place in a higher education institution or programme. Quality improvement identifies developmental processes, such as the strengths and weaknesses of institutions and their academic provision. The International Institute for Educational Planning carried out a research project focusing on organisational and methodological options in quality assurance systems (UNESCO 2013:1).

#### 4.3.1 Relevance in the VUT

In order to determine whether or not the student learning and successes of the diplomas and degrees offered by the VUT are valued by employers, the VUT will:

- Monitor delivery of the employability of students;
- Work towards the embedding of skills and attitudes within the curriculum;
- Support existing and new programmes to take account of employer needs as the curriculum develops; and
- Encourage departments to have employer forums (advisory committees), and use critical colleagues or alumni as ways of testing external perceptions of the value of programmes (Smit 2013:11).

The VUT also makes use of the "PIRI-model" as seen below.

Figure 3:



PIRI is the abbreviation for Plan, Implement, Review and Improve.

- Plan – includes the setting of a new strategic direction or a key improvement to the current practice, on the basis of internal and/or external review.
- Implement – to implement the plan and monitoring the result against the agreed performance measures.
- Review – to review the performance against the data reported and to re-plan.
- Improvement – based on review as well as the sustaining of those areas of good practice that is identified as working well during the implementation (University of Western Sydney 2013:1).

The authors therefore draw the conclusion that, when the VUT applies its Teaching and Learning model and Academic Plan through making use of the PIRI model, it will be successful in its teaching and learning as well as in its quality assurance.

#### 4.4 Higher Education Quality Committee

According to the founding document (2001:9), the HEQC is committed to a quality-driven higher education system that contributes to socio-economic development, social justice and innovative scholarship in South Africa. The HEQC will support the development, maintenance and enhancement of the quality of public and private higher education provision

in order to enable a range of stakeholders to benefit from effective higher education and training. The central objective of the HEQC is to ensure that providers effectively and efficiently deliver education, training, research and community service which are of high quality and which produce socially useful and enriching knowledge as well as a relevant range of graduate skills and competencies necessary for social and economic progress. The policies and programmes of the HEQC will be guided by the above commitments and objectives.

The HEQC reaffirms its commitment to the development and implementation of a quality assurance system which is suited to the local needs and realities of South African higher education. The HEQC supports the purpose of higher education as identified in the *White Paper on Higher Education, 1997*:

- To meet the learning needs and aspirations of the citizens of South Africa through the development of their intellectual abilities and aptitudes throughout their lives. Higher education can equip these citizens to make the best use of their talents and of the opportunities offered by society for self-fulfilment.
- To address the developmental needs of the society and to provide the labour market, in a knowledge-driven and knowledge-dependent society, with the ever-changing high-level competencies and expertise necessary for the growth and prosperity of a modern economy.
- To contribute to the socialisation of enlightened, responsible and constructively critical citizens. Higher education can encourage the development of a reflective capacity and a willingness to review and renew existing ideas, policies and practices based on a commitment to the common good.
- To contribute to the construction, sharing and evaluation of knowledge. Higher education engages in the pursuit of academic scholarship and intellectual inquiry in all fields of human understanding, through research, learning and teaching (White Paper 3, 1997: 1.3).

The HEQC, in its 2012–2017 document, declares that quality is defined by “fitness for purpose” which refers to the ability of institutions to discharge their responsibilities in relation to their missions (CHE 2011:17).

The efficiency and effectiveness with which institutions carry out their functions (teaching and learning, research and community engagement) in the context of their specific missions is a measure of the value society, the state and families receive from their investment. Depending on the focus and purpose of the specific quality assurance methodologies, the HEQC will look into the efficiency and effectiveness with which institutions discharge their responsibilities in relation to teaching and learning, taking into account the constraints experienced by public providers in terms of state funding (CHE 2011:21).

From the above declaration of the HEQC, it is evident that they are promoting the three elements (as discussed in this assignment) of quality assurance in higher education.

## 5. Findings from the Literature

- The higher education funding framework has evolved gradually over time and the new funding formula is more state-centred and less cost-related, which creates new uncertainties for institutions.
- The majority of students in higher education are adult learners; they remain poorly and unequally served at all levels of the university, a problem exacerbated by poor information and monitoring of the group.
- The change in higher education, whether planned or incidental, takes its pace and direction from a range of complex variables that is shaped by particular institutional contexts.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper the authors addressed the three elements of quality assurance, namely quality, standards and relevance. From the literature it is evident that quality has been defined differently in different contexts. It is a much used and little understood term. Quality in higher education means that the education process is such that it ensures that students achieve their goals, and thereby satisfies the needs of society and contributes to national development.

Quality (see 4.1) is ensured by participation and representation in structures and processes. The two functions of the NQF are standards setting and quality assurance to ensure that quality qualifications and standards are generated and registered and that quality assurance ensures that delivery of quality programmes is evaluated and monitored by the ETOA. This will further ensure that assessment is conducted by registered assessors and moderators.

In discussing standards (see 4.2), the literature revealed many acts, policies and documents that regulate higher education in South Africa. However, the opinion of the author is that sometimes these documents look good on paper, but that their successful implementation needs many more dedicated people with skills and knowledge. Effective

implementation plans as well as continuous training of all stakeholders and dedicated, motivated staff will, in the opinion of the author, go a long way towards turning "paperwork" into practical success. It would seem that the model implemented by VUT currently lacks an effective implementation plan, and this needs to be addressed.

Finally, when interrogating relevance (see 4.3), the author noted that quality assurance in higher education is important because of the rapid expansion of higher education systems. Globalisation has also brought with it an increasing level of academic fraud, such as diploma mills, fly-by-night providers, bogus institutions or fake credentials. This increases the demand for trustworthy organisations that can establish confidence using quality assurance methods.

The authors therefore conclude that for any institution of higher education to be respected, recognised and sought after, effective quality assurance is of the utmost importance. VUT has implemented a system of quality assurance, and management now have the responsibility of maintaining, improving and ensuring adherence to the system.

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