

**QUALITY ASSURANCE MECHANISMS IN HIGHER  
EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN NAMIBIA**

by

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**Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree**

**Philosophiae Doctor in Higher Education Studies**

**(PhD Higher Education Studies)**

**in the School of Higher Education Studies**

**Faculty of Education**

**UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE**

**BLOEMFONTEIN**

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**January 2012**

## **DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that the work which is submitted here is the result of my own independent investigation and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references. I further declare that the work is submitted for the first time at this university towards the Philosophiae Doctor (PhD) degree in Higher Education Studies and that it has never been submitted to any other institution for the purpose of obtaining a degree.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A number of people and organisations have made a significant contribution to this research study through their expertise, support and advice. I, therefore, wish to recognise and gratefully acknowledge the assistance and contributions of the following persons and institutions, without which this thesis could not have been completed:

- Firstly, I am grateful to my promoters for their professional mentorship throughout my entire study. Special thanks are due to **Dr LJ van der Westhuizen**, my main promoter, for his continuous interest, patience, insight, guidance, enthusiasm, creative inputs, constructive criticism, motivation, extremely competent academic guidance and, above all, his positive attitude throughout the course of this research. His brilliant supervision and enthusiastic support during the study helped me to emerge victorious. Also, thanks to **Dr MJ Bezuidenhout**, my co-promoter, for her extremely supportive and competent academic guidance and, above all, her positive attitude throughout the course of my research. All her time, patience and effort, together with her advice and recommendations, contributed greatly to the success of this study.
- Secondly, I would like to express my gratitude to all the HEIs that participated in this study. In particular, I would like to thank the **individual** participants from **these institutions** who put in so much effort and took the time to participate in both the interviews and the focus group discussion, and without whose valuable perspectives and opinions this outcome would not have been realised. This thesis is based on their inputs and would not have been completed without the contributions of everyone from these institutions who participated in this research study.

- Furthermore, I would like to thank all those **authors** whose scholarly works are cited in this study in the form of references.
- My gratitude goes to the **University of the Free State**, in general, and to the **School of Higher Education Studies, Faculty of Education**, in particular, for granting me the opportunity to pursue my PhD studies.
- I do not want to forget the **participants** in the pilot study for their meaningful recommendations which improved the data collection instruments used in the final study.
- My special thanks go to my parents, **Timoteus** and **Sigrid Kadhila**, for bringing me up in a positive, hardworking environment, and for encouraging me to succeed academically, despite the financial hardships the family was going through. They have been my mentors and role models. Thank you for the sacrifices you made for me.
- My wife, **Josephine Dutte Kadhila**, for encouraging me and allowing me the time to complete the study and for always being there for me. Her moral support, patience and encouragement are profoundly admirable.
- My children, **Precious Nasimane** and **Mercy Penehafo**, for their motivation, support and patience, and their acceptance of the fact that I was often occupied and not available to do the things that fathers usually do.
- Special thanks are also due to my all **brothers** and **sisters** for their constant comfort and support.
- My colleagues, **Francis Sifiso Nyathi**, **Johanna Aipanda**, and **Saima Nghihalwa**, for their meaningful advice, support and courage throughout my study.
- A special thank you to my best friend, **Tibias Ammonga**, for his assistance and encouragement in so many ways.
- My other **friends** and **associates**, for their support and encouragement during this study.

- **Everybody else** who contributed to this study in one way or the other. I wish to express my indebtedness to them all.
- And, above all, my **Heavenly Father**, for the abilities He mercifully granted me, and for the strength, perseverance and determination to complete this study.

***TANGI UNENE! - Thank you very much!***

Ngepathimo Kadhila

Windhoek, Namibia

January 2012

## THESIS DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my wife, **Josephine Dutte**, my son, **Precious Nasimane**, and my daughter, **Mercy Penehafo**, for their moral support and love. Without their love, patience, support and encouragement this research study would not have been completed. This work represents my personal goal as an individual to achieve my full potential in education as a discipline and a profession that I have always held in high esteem. I attained my first degree (Bachelor of Education), my Master's degree in Education: Curriculum Instructional and Assessment Studies, and now my Doctorate (PhD) in Higher Education Studies. These achievements stem from a personal responsibility for my own self development and are based on determination, courage, and self sacrifice. I hope that this work serves as a challenge to my children to set personal goals in terms of developing a strong drive, ambition and esteem in whatever careers they choose if they have to realise their self-esteem and full potential and maximise their own abilities.

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## **ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS**

<b>AAU</b>	Association of Africa Universities
<b>ACTET</b>	Advisory Council of Teacher Education and Training in Namibia
<b>AU</b>	African Union
<b>CES</b>	Centre for External Studies of the University of Namibia
<b>CHE</b>	Council on Higher Education in South Africa
<b>CIHE</b>	Commission on Institutions of Higher Education of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges
<b>COL</b>	Commonwealth of Learning
<b>COLL</b>	Centre for Open and Lifelong Learning of the Polytechnic of Namibia
<b>ENQA</b>	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
<b>ESG</b>	European Standards and Guidelines
<b>ESMU</b>	European Centre for Strategic Management
<b>ETSIP</b>	Education and Training Sector Improvement Programme
<b>EUA</b>	European University Association
<b>FETAC</b>	Education and Training Awards Council in Ireland
<b>GATS</b>	General Agreement on Trade in Services

<b>GDP</b>	Growth Development Productivity
<b>GRN</b>	Government of the Republic of Namibia
<b>HE</b>	Higher Education
<b>HEIs</b>	Higher Education Institutions
<b>HEQC</b>	Higher Education Quality Council in South Africa
<b>ICT</b>	Information Communication Technology
<b>INQAAHE</b>	International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
<b>IQA</b>	Internal Quality Assurance
<b>IUCEA</b>	Inter-University Council for East Africa
<b>IUM</b>	International University of Management
<b>MIS</b>	Management Information System
<b>MoE</b>	Ministry of Education in Namibia
<b>NAAC</b>	National Assessment and Accreditation in India
<b>NCHE</b>	National Commission for Higher Education in Malta
<b>NCHE</b>	National Council for Higher Education in Namibia
<b>NDP3</b>	Third National Development Plan in Namibia
<b>NQA</b>	Namibia Qualifications Authority

<b>NQF</b>	National Qualifications Framework
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>PhD</b>	Doctor of Philosophy
<b>PoN</b>	Polytechnic of Namibia
<b>QA</b>	Quality assurance
<b>QAA</b>	Quality Assurance Agency
<b>QMS</b>	Quality management system
<b>SADC</b>	Southern African Development Community
<b>SARUA</b>	Southern African Regional Universities Association
<b>TFP</b>	Total Factor Productivity
<b>UFS</b>	University of the Free State
<b>UNAM</b>	University of Namibia
<b>UNESCO</b>	United Nations Education, Science and Culture Organisation

## ABSTRACT

**Key words:** *systematic quality assurance, Higher Education Institutions, internal quality assurance mechanisms, best practice quality assurance framework*

Throughout the world, quality assurance (QA) has become an increasingly dominant theme in higher education (HE) in recent years, with international processes playing an important role in the way in which quality assurance is interpreted and implemented (European Commission Tempus, 2009:7). The importance of quality assurance mechanisms in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is reflected in the literature review which suggests that clearly defined and effective quality assurance policies are necessary in order to raise the standards in HEIs.

The main drivers of change in higher education and the incentives for introducing more structured approaches to quality assurance have been identified as the growth in student numbers (massification), the recognition that higher education and skills levels are vital elements in the economic, political and social development of countries, stakeholder demands for accountability, and the perception that higher education has become both an international and a competitive market area. These are some of the many factors that have contributed to the understanding of the need for greater transparency and consistency in quality assurance in HEIs (Becket & Brookes, 2005:1; Fresen, 2005:18).

Globally, the majority of HEIs in most countries have now implemented more structured and systematic approaches to quality assurance in response to the new demands for quality higher education in order to ensure high academic standards, integrity and accountability. The

Commonwealth of Learning (COL) suggests that, while there is a clear need for the development and implementation of quality assurance strategies in HEIs throughout the world, there is, nevertheless, a lack of uniformity and agreement in respect of the form that such strategies should take (COL, 2009:3). This also applies to the HEIs in Namibia.

This study was conducted in order to investigate the phenomenon of quality assurance with special reference to the internal quality assurance mechanisms implemented by HEIs in Namibia and, based on the findings of the study, to make recommendations aimed at the improvement of the practice of quality assurance in higher education in Namibia. The recommendations are contained in a proposed framework for best practice in quality assurance in HEIs in Namibia – see Annexure to this thesis.

As background to the study an extensive literature review was conducted to investigate the phenomenon of quality assurance. This literature review revealed that, apart from unpublished official documents, there is little information available on empirical literature on quality assurance in higher education in Namibia. Accordingly, the researcher identified the need to investigate the field of quality assurance in higher education in Namibia in an attempt to close the existing knowledge gap.

The research design was tailored to the purposes of this study and comprised a qualitative research approach. A phenomenological explorative and descriptive design was used with the aim of seeking an understanding and interpretation of the true meaning that the participants accorded to their experience of the phenomenon under study, namely, quality assurance in HEIs. In other words, this design provided the researcher with an opportunity to understand the

phenomena as they unfolded in their natural setting during the enquiry. The methodology was based on improvement-oriented evaluation.

The study confined itself to degree-granting HEIs only, with a university status. Three institutions participated in the study – one public university, one private university, and one polytechnic. The data were collected by means of individual interviews (purposeful sampling) and institutional document analyses. Focus group interviews were conducted for the purposes of triangulation. This threefold approach was adopted so as to allow the triangulation that would ensure effective data collection and information validation.

The key research questions in terms of which the study aimed to find answers may be summarised as follows:

***What are the internal quality assurance mechanisms in place in HEIs in Namibia?  
What may be said about the implementation stage of these mechanisms, and are there areas of possible improvement?***

The study revealed, inter alia, that the overall picture is that the new paradigm for quality assurance systems in higher education in Namibia, in its current format and at both national and institutional level, is an extremely recent phenomenon as it is in the initial stage of development. The NCHE's national quality assurance system in Namibian higher education was only introduced in 2009. Certain institutions had taken the initiative to introduce formalised quality assurance systems before 2009. However, mechanisms and procedures for self-evaluation have not been part of the quality assurance practices of HEIs. No attention has ever been given to

benchmarking as one of the mechanisms of quality assurance which identifies best practices from which to learn in the interests of improvement. Many quality assurance mechanisms are informal and it is essential that attention be given to more structured mechanisms. Overall, there is a growing awareness of internal quality assurance in the Namibian HEIs. There is, however, very little agreement on notions of quality and quality assurance in these HEIs in Namibia. The understanding of the concept of quality assurance and the involvement of key stakeholders, such as students and employers, tend to be limited and, in the case of employers, actually relatively rare. Quality culture in HEIs in Namibia is generally extremely low. In certain institutions there appears to be a gap between the formal legal requirements and the actual implementation of quality assurance. There seems to be a lack of publicly available, transparent information about the quality assurance processes and their outcomes in the HEIs in Namibia. Where they do, in fact, exist, quality assurance units and offices in HEIs tend to be inadequately resourced. Although there are some notable exceptions, central information systems, which are key to effective decision-making, are still lacking in most HEIs. A framework for best practice in quality assurance in HEIs in Namibia, aimed at the improvement of the practice of quality assurance in higher education in Namibia, was deemed necessary and, thus, such a framework was developed and suggested. See Annexure A attached to Chapter 6.

The value of this study is to be found in its endeavour to address the lack of research on quality assurance in higher education in Namibia. It is hoped that the study will make a meaningful contribution to the establishment and improvement of quality assurance in a relatively 'young' higher education system in Africa.

The significance of the study lies in its enhancing the awareness of the current development of quality assurance in higher education practices and in its promoting the need to introduce formalised internal quality assurance systems and processes in order to improve the quality levels in HEIs in Namibia.

Through this study much needed information on institutional quality assurance will be available to HEIs in Namibia, and also to government, higher education policy makers, and development partners. In addition, the study addressed the issue of accountability and continuous improvement as regards protecting the students from poor quality higher education.

## OPSOMMING

***Sleutelwoorde: Sistematiese gehalteversekering, hoëronderwysinstellings, interne gehalteversekeringsmeganismes, beste praktyke, gehalteversekeringsraamwerk.***

Gedurende die afgelope aantal jare het gehalteversekering (GV) wêreldwyd 'n dominante onderwerp in hoër onderwys (HO) geword. Dit omsluit onder andere internasionale prosesse wat 'n belangrike rol speel in die wyse hoe gehalteversekering geïnterpreteer en geïmplementeer word (European Commission Tempus, 2009:7). Die belangrikheid van gehalteversekeringsmeganismes vir hoëronderwys instellings (HOIs) word in die literatuur gereflekteer en suggereer en meld dat duidelike gedefinieerde en effektiewe gehalteversekeringbeleide noodsaaklik is om die standaard van HOIs te verhoog.

Die belangrikste dryfveer vir verandering in hoëronderwys en die bekendstelling van 'n meer gestruktureerde benadering tot gehalteversekering kan geïdentifiseer word as die groei in studentetalle (massifikasie); erkenning dat hoëronderwys en vaardigheidsvlakke noodsaaklike elemente is vir die ekonomiese, politieke en sosiale ontwikkeling van lande; rolspelers se aandrang op rekenskap; en die persepsie dat hoëronderwys in beide die internasionale en kompeterende mark meeding. Hierdie is slegs sommige van die baie faktore wat meewerk tot die verstaan van die behoeftes vir groter deursigtigheid en koersvastheid van die HOIs se gehalteversekering (Becket & Brooks, 2005:1; Fresen, 2005:18).

Wêreldwyd het hoëronderwysinstellings in verskeie lande meer gestruktureerde en sistematiese benaderings tot gehalteversekering geïmplementeer, in reaksie tot die nuwe vereistes vir gehalte hoër onderwys en vir die versekering van hoër akademiese standaard, integriteit en

verantwoordelikheid. Die Commonwealth of Learning (COL) suggereer dat daar wêreldwyd 'n behoefte bestaan vir die ontwikkeling en implementering van gehalteversekeringsstrategie in HOIs. Daar is egter nie eensgesindheid rakende die formaat van hierdie strategie nie (COL, 2009:3). Hierdie stelling is ook van toepassing op die HOIs in Namibië.

Hierdie studie is onderneem om die gehalteversekeringsfenomeen te ondersoek, met spesiale verwysing na die interne gehalteversekeringsmeganismes wat in HOIs in Namibië geïmplementeer is. Gebaseer op die bevindings van hierdie studie word aanbevelings gemaak wat gemik is op die verbetering van gehalteversekeringspraktyke in hoër onderwys in Namibië. Hierdie aanbevelings is opgeneem in 'n voorgestelde raamwerk vir beste praktyk in gehalteversekering van HOIs in Namibië – sien Bylaag tot hierdie tesis.

'n Uitgebreide literatuurstudie is as agtergrond tot die studie gedoen om die gehalteversekeringsfenomeen te ondersoek. Die literatuurstudie het getoon dat, afgesien van die ongepubliseerde amptelike dokumentasie, daar weinig inligting en empiriese literatuur beskikbaar is rakende die gehalteversekering van hoër onderwys in Namibië. Gevolglik het die navorser die behoefte geïdentifiseer om die die terrein van gehalteversekering in hoër onderwys in Namibië te ondersoek as poging om die bepaalde kennisgaping te oorbrug.

Die navorsingsontwerp is ontwikkel met die doelstellings van die studie voor oë en bestaan uit 'n kwantitatiewe ondersoekbenadering. 'n Fenomenologiese beskrywende ontwerp is gebruik met die doel om begrip en duidelikheid te verkry rakende die ware betekenis en ervaring van die fenomeen wat bestudeer word, naamlik die gehalteversekering in HOIs, soos ervaar deur die betrokke deelnemers. Anders gestel, hierdie ontwerp het die navorser die geleentheid gebied om

die fenomeen te verstaan soos dit ontvou het gedurende die studie, gesetel in 'n natuurlike situasie. Die metodologie is gebaseer op 'n verbeteringsgeoriënteerde evaluering.

Die studie is beperk tot hoërondewysinstansies in Namibië wat graadstudies aanbied. Drie sodanige instansies was deel van hierdie studie, naamlik een openbare universiteit, een privaat universiteit en 'n polyteknikon. Die data is ingesamel deur middel van 'n analise van institusionele dokumentasie. Die fokusgroeponderhoude is onderneem vir triangulasie. Hierdie metode van drievoudige triangulasie-evaluering het effektiewe dataversameling en inligtingsgeldigheid verseker.

Die kernondersoekvraag waarop die studie gemik was is om antwoorde te verkry op die kernvraag wat as volg opgesom word:

***Watter interne gehalteversekeringsmeganismes bestaan tans aan Namibiese hoërondewysinstellings? Op watter stadium van implementering is hierdie meganismes, en bestaan daar terreine vir moontlike verbetering?***

Die studie het onder andere aan die lig gebring dat die oorkoepelende nuwe paradigma vir gehalteversekeringsisteme in Namibiese hoër onderwys in die huidige formaat, en beide op nasionale en institusionele vlak, 'n relatief resente fenomeen is wat in 'n beginstadium van ontwikkeling is. Geen nasionale gehalteversekeringsstelsel het vóór 2009 in Namibiese hoër onderwys bestaan nie. Sommige instansies het wel voor 2009 inisiatief geneem om enkele formele gehalteversekeringsisteme te vestig. Meganismes en prosedures vir self-evaluering was egter nie deel van die gehalteversekeringspraktyke van die HOIs nie. Geen aandag is gegee

aan yking as een van die gehalteversekeringsmeganismes om beste praktyke as 'n vorm van leer met die oog op verbetering te identifiseer nie. Baie gehalteversekeringsmeganismes is informeel en dit is noodsaaklik dat meer aandag aan die vestiging van meer gestruktureerde meganismes gegee moet word. In die geheel gesien is daar toenemende bewustheid van interne gehalteversekeringsbewustheid in die Namibiese HOIs. Daar bestaan egter weinig eenstemmigheid oor die betekenis van die begrippe gehalte en gehalteversekering aan Namibiese HOIs. Begrip van die konsep van gehalteversekering en die betrokkenheid van sleutelrolspelers, soos studente en werkgewers, neig om beperk te wees, en in die geval van werkgewers bestaan dit bykans nie. Daar is bykans geen sprake van 'n kultuur van gehalteversekering in Namibiese hoër onderwys nie. Daar is ook 'n gaping tussen die formele wettiese vereistes en die implementering van gehalteversekering en 'n tekort aan amptelike en deursigtige inligting rakende gehalteversekeringsprosesse en gepaardgaande uitkomst in die HOIs van Namibië. Waar gehalteversekeringseenhede en -kantore wel by HOIs bestaan is daar gewoonlik 'n gebrek aan die nodige ondersteuningsmiddele. Alhoewel daar enkele uitsonderings is, is daar aan die meeste van die HOIs 'n gebrek aan 'n sentrale inligtingsstelsel wat noodsaaklik is vir effektiewe besluitneming. 'n Raamwerk vir beste praktyke in gehalteversekering vir hoër onderwys in Namibië blyk dus noodsaaklik te wees. Sodanige raamwerk is ontwikkel en word voorgestel (sien Bylae A in Hoofstuk 6).

Die waarde van hierdie studie is daarin geleë dat dit 'n poging is om die tekort aan navorsing oor gehalteversekering in hoër onderwys in Namibië aan te vul. Die navorser vertrou dat die studie 'n bruikbare bydrae sal lewer tot die daarstelling en verbetering van die gehalteversekeringsmeganismes van 'n relatief jong hoëronderwysstelsel in Afrika.

Die belangrikheid van die studie is om 'n bewustheid te kweek rakende bestaande gehalteversekeringspraktyke en die uitbouing van die behoefte om geformaliseerde interne gehalteversekeringsisteme en – prosesse van die HOIs te verbeter.

Hierdie verslag sal inligting oor gehalteversekering wat dringend nodig word, beskikbaar stel aan HOIs in Namibië, en ook aan die regering, hoërondewysbeleidmakers en ontwikkelingsvennote. Hierbenewens het die studie die kwessie van verantwoordingdoening en voortgesette verbetering onder die loep geneem ten einde studente teen hoër onderwys van swak gehalte te beskerm.

# CHAPTER 1

## ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY

*An examination of a knife would reveal that its distinctive quality is to cut, and from this we can conclude that a good knife would be a knife that cuts well (Aristotle in Friend-Pereira, Lutz & Heerens, 2002:12).*

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

Over the generations higher education institutions have played a pivotal role in the development of nations (Rizk & Al-Alusi, 2009:14). However, in the twenty-first century, higher education has assumed even greater importance as it generates knowledge – the key driver of global economy and development. It is on this premise that the importance of higher education as regards the development of the excellence, expertise and knowledge leading to the overall development of the economy may not be underestimated (Ali & Shastri, 2010:7). The World Bank's study of 190 countries reveals that it is higher education that plays a role in enriching the quality of manpower. Accordingly, higher education is a basic investment which is necessary in order to improve the overall quality of life. The strong link between the economy and education has never been as clearly visible as now. In addition, higher education today is at the centre of what is termed the society of knowledge, or the information age. It is also an essential aspect of the national development of almost all the countries in the world, whether they are already developed, on their way to being developed or aspiring to be developed (World Bank, 2002:ix).

Higher education institutions represent a valuable resource for any country in the world and provide the educated men and women who often serve as the social, political, technological, economic and religious leaders of the country (World Bank, 2002:ix; Ratcliff in Strydom, Lategan

& Muller, 1997:2). Several countries have recognised the critical importance of higher education and have, thus, invested considerable attention and resources in it (*cf.* Ratcliff in Strydom *et al.*, 1997:2). According to Stephenson (2003:1), one way in which to guarantee that higher education is both sensitive to national situations and offers value for money is to assure constant and efficient high standards in the provision of those institutions that deliver higher education. In order to achieve this on a formal basis, many countries all over the world have instituted national quality assurance agencies both to coordinate the proper development of higher education and to ensure high standards in the provision of higher education so that academic programmes are offered in conducive environments, using the best human and physical resources (Stephenson, 2003:4). A number of HEIs have, thus, put in place internal systems that ensure comprehensive training and best practices.

Over time, quality assurance in higher education has assumed prominence, both nationally and globally (Arsovski 2007:22). Different quality assurance practices have attracted attention all over the world. As students and staff move from one country and one continent to another, the issue of the transferability of credits and the comparability of qualifications have become major issues as regards the comparability of higher education provisions and standards. Consequently, several countries have established quality assurance agencies to ensure that quality is a key consideration in the offerings of HEIs (*cf.* Becket & Brookes, 2005:1; Strydom & Griesel in Strydom & Van der Westhuizen, 2002:37).

In view of the fundamental and vital nature of quality assurance it is, thus, pertinent that HEIs develop formal systems, processes and mechanisms for quality assurance to ensure high academic standards, integrity and accountability (Mohamedbhai, 2006:6). Nevertheless, the literature review in this study reveals that the phenomenon of formalised/institutionalised quality assurance systems is relatively new in the higher education systems of many countries, especially

the developing countries, and there is also a lack of resources, experience and capacity (Griesel, Strydom & Van der Westhuizen, 2002:xvi). Quality assurance is being addressed in different ways in HEIs worldwide, and not all institutions have reached the same level of implementing formal internal quality assurance systems (Griesel *et al.*, 2002:74).

Despite international experiences, it would appear that the current status quo of quality assurance systems in the higher education context in Namibia has not yet been established. In addition, based on the literature review that the researcher conducted, there is little information available on quality assurance in higher education (HE) in Namibia, thus necessitating investigation into the phenomenon. It is for this reason that the researcher decided to embark on this study. The study focuses on an evaluation of the current internal quality assurance mechanisms used by HEIs (both public and private) in Namibia, and, based on the findings, the study made recommendations aimed at the improvement of the practice of quality assurance in HEIs in Namibia. This study proposes that adapting the most successful and relevant mechanisms for quality assurance would help HEIs to bring about higher standards of quality in education (Arsovski 2007:22). Accordingly, the study identified international best practices from which the HEIs in Namibia may learn and a generic quality assurance framework or set of criteria that may guide the practice in HEIs in Namibia was subsequently developed.

This introductory chapter sets out the orientation to the study by providing information on the theoretical background to quality assurance in higher education, and provides a contextual background to the study. The chapter also provides an overview which serves as the frame of reference for the study. This includes the rationale for the research orientation, as well as background information pertinent to the thesis in order to place the research problem in context. In addition, the chapter also presents the research plan, which reflects the justification for the choice of phenomenon to be investigated, the problem statement, the objectives of the study,

research questions and research assumptions. An exposition of the demarcation/scope of the study, limitations of the study, the research methodology and data collection techniques used, as well as the abbreviations which are used throughout the thesis, are also presented. This is followed by a concise explanation of the most frequently used terms which are peculiar to this thesis. Finally, a visual representation of the thesis layout is provided as well as a summary of the chapter outline with the chapter then concluding with a summary of information contained in the chapter.

## **1.2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

Nowadays, there is so much attention paid to the phenomenon of quality that the notion may arise that quality is an invention of the last decades. Indeed, according to the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA), it is possible to have the impression that higher education had no notion of quality before 1985, although this is, in fact, not true (IUCEA, 2008a:7). Attention to quality is not new and, on the contrary, it has always been part of the academic tradition with concern about the quality of higher education being as old as the HEIs themselves. The IUCEA argues that it is the outside world that is now emphasising the need for explicit attention to quality. However, as far back as the Middle Ages in Europe, scholars would travel long distances in search of "good" HEIs (Strydom *et al.*, 1997:63). In the early days HEIs and academic staff did, indeed, pay attention to quality, but often in an unstructured way (IUCEA, 2008b:8). According to IUCEA (2008b:8), during these early days, HEIs acquired their reputations based on the quality of their teaching, in the same way as modern, "world-class" HEIs, such as Harvard and Oxford, are today sought after because of their reputation for the quality higher education and scholarship they offer. During these early days, quality assurance in higher education functioned in ways that were related to the strong traditions of *academic freedom* and *institutional autonomy* in higher education (Strydom *et al.*, 1997:37). According to this, Strydom

*et al.* (1997), certain HEIs used mechanisms such as external examiners at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, while other institutions tended to opt for this practice at postgraduate level only, while others had no established practice of using external examiners at all. In those days, it was the elite only who participated in higher education and, in addition, there were only a few students who were able to make it through the education system to this level (*cf.* Brennan & Shah, 2000a:70). These traditional practices meant that there were minimal challenges to the quality of higher education provision as compared to the many challenges facing higher education today (Lagrada, 2002:18).

According to Shin and Harman (2009:1) and Jacobs in Strydom *et al.* (1997:144), the latter part of the 20th century was a period of considerable development in many aspects of human endeavour, with higher education playing a central role in these developments. Many governments as well as other interest groups the world over started to realise that a large group of highly educated people is essential for the prosperity of society (*cf.* UNESCO, 2007:20). As a result, governments of many countries commit a large percentage of public funds to the development of higher education in order to provide the quality higher education that will ensure the development of nations. Policies on access to education, including higher education, have also been formulated to eliminate the legal and economic barriers that were preventing the lower socio-economic classes from participating in higher education (Shin & Harman, 2009:3). This role of quality higher education in the development of nations has also been acknowledged by international organisations such as the Association of African Universities (AAU), the World Bank, and the United Nations Education, Science and Culture Organisation (UNESCO). Indeed, on its website, the AAU (2008:1) suggests that quality higher education has been found to be important factor in national development. In addition, the World Bank has also been cited by the AAU (2008:1) as acknowledging higher education as a critical element of development on which the developing countries must focus if they are to make progress in a world that feeds on knowledge

and breeds on competition. Similarly, Neetens (2007:19) notes that higher education is essential to developing countries, if they are to prosper in a world economy in which knowledge has become a vital area of advantage. The World Bank (2002:22), Materu (2007:38), and Bouton and Lucas (2008:4) all maintain that higher education is a critical pillar for social, political and economic development. In addition, it is a vital source of new knowledge and innovative thinking, it contributes to innovation, it attracts international talent and business involvement to a region, it is an agent of social justice and mobility, as well as contributing to social and cultural vitality.

Bloom, Canning and Chan (2006:18) argue that "expanding higher education may promote faster technological catch-up to improve a country's ability to maximise its economic output and national development". It is against the above background that the demand for higher education has increased significantly amongst those members of the society who have, traditionally, not participated in higher education on a large scale. Since 1980s, profound changes have characterised the higher education system with the expansion of higher education from the élite to the masses to universal systems; the reduction in financial support from governments; the growth of alternative systems of education and training such as private higher education; the need to respond to globalisation; and the knowledge society and information technology being at the heart of these changes (Reddy in Strydom *et al.*, 1997:viii). Student enrolment has been increasing rapidly as a result of the removal of the legal and economic barriers that had promoted élite higher education, thus, now promoting mass education or, in other words, "education for all" (*cf.* Shin & Harman, 2009:6).

According to the Commonwealth of Learning, this massification of higher education has placed tremendous pressure on HEIs to open their doors to increasing numbers of students as the demand for access to higher education has soared (COL, 2009:xi). Growing numbers of private

HEIs have also emerged to help expand *access* to higher education (*cf.* Shin and Harman, 2009:1) and governments are, thus, no longer the sole providers of higher education (UNESCO, 2002:2). Quality higher education however, has become an issue of concern for different interest groups (*cf.* Shin & Harman, 2009:1). According to Shin and Harman (2009:2), mass and universal higher education has meant that HEIs are now struggling with contradictory goals. On the one hand, there are strong pressures to expand access but, on the other hand, there is an urgent need to overcome shortfalls such as “low quality” (Becket & Brookes, 2005:1). It is obvious that the increased demand for higher education together with the relatively scarce resources have serious implications for the quality of the higher education provided with finances, staffing and infrastructure coming under tremendous pressure in the provision of higher education (Jacobs in Strydom *et al.*, 1997:145).

Global movements in higher education reform have brought quality assurance in HEIs into the spotlight (Kistan, 1999:22). Increasing demand has meant that higher education has had to improvise in many ways in order to be able to provide the required standard of higher education. Nevertheless, the quality of the higher education provided has been severely questioned in recent years by various stakeholders in the sector, including both higher education experts and employers (Bloom *et al.*, 2006:18). The issue of quality assurance has, thus, become the focus of HEIs worldwide (Becket & Brookes, 2005:1), with the topic of quality in the provision of higher education, as well as the way in which this quality is both evaluated and enhanced, growing in importance and becoming one of the first policy priorities and key issues on the agendas of the on-going discussions on higher education worldwide (Shin & Harman, 2009:1).

According to Aristotle in Friend-Pereira *et al.* (2002:23), the increasing demand for good quality higher education by students, society, employers, and other stakeholders implies that HEIs are now experiencing more pressure to provide quality education and services than ever before.

Ullah (2005:1) alleges that “most of HEIs could no longer produce quality products due to factors such as shortage of funds, ill-qualified teachers, lack of professional competencies, and inadequate research facilities in institutions”. Ullah (2005:1) also claims that “these implications often become even more serious for HEIs that lack financial and infrastructural resources and have recognition issues, as well as facing stronger competition from local, distance and international institutions”. This provocative situation, thus, poses a challenge to HEIs to adjust their programme structures, curricula, teaching and learning methods in order to adapt to these new demands. Accordingly, most HEIs worldwide have, progressively implemented more systematic, formalised quality assurance systems and processes, recognising this as a way in which to achieve greater efficiency and accountability (Charmers, 2008:5).

Smout in Fresen (2005:7) alleges that education institutions, including HEIs, tend to be conservative and resistant to change. Nevertheless, the field of higher education has experienced a period of dynamic change, growth, reflection and self-evaluation with quality assurance in higher education systems becoming an international phenomenon that has attracts the attention of interest groups as a result of the developments alluded to above. Some of the factors currently influencing the higher education landscape include globalisation, massification, client needs and expectations, scarce resources, rapid technological change and an increased call for quality assurance (Fourie & Strydom, in Letuka, 2000:12; Becket & Brookes, 2005:1; Fresen, 2005:18).

- **Massification:** Higher education is no longer the preserve of small numbers of privileged students, as it was in past centuries. Society today has demonstrated an increased interest in and demand for higher education qualifications and this, in turn, has led to ever-increasing student numbers. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as the ‘massification’ of higher education (Jonathan, 2000:45). However, some experts fear that this massification of higher

education may lead to the lowering of standards, as if more students necessarily imply the lowering of standards (Jennings, 2007:12).

- ***Client needs and expectations:*** Higher education is no longer perceived as the domain of academics and students only. This is as a result of society's renewed interest in higher education and its perceived benefits for both social and economic development. In addition, the burgeoning student clientele has brought increased expectations on behalf of the students themselves, as well as other stakeholders such as parents, employers, funders and governments (*cf.* Fresen, 2005:19). The quality of higher education has been a matter of long-standing concern for employers, both as graduate recruiters and as research and training collaborators.
- ***Scarce financial and human resources:*** Although there has been an explosion in the enrolment figures at HEIs in both the developed and developing countries, the capacity to finance such expansion has not kept pace. Not only are the financial resources insufficient, but the academics are suffering under the burden of the additional loads, and it would appear that they often resent the 'quality burden' thrust on them (Fresen, 2005:19).
- ***Globalisation:*** Globalisation has increased the importance of insight into both the quality of HEIs and their programmes, and the standards of their graduates. It is possible for prospective students today to be extremely particular in their choice of selection from among the high profile educational institutions around the globe. The increased competitiveness of this environment is forcing academics and institutions to demonstrate the quality and effectiveness of both their academic programmes and their research initiatives (*cf.* Griesel *et al.*, 2002:19).
- ***Rapid technological change:*** Distance learning today is enabled through technological advancement, and this has changed the higher education landscape, thus resulting in the increased mobility of students (Fresen, 2005:19).

- ***Call for quality assurance:*** Calls for quality assurance in HEIs have become prevalent as governments evaluate both the efficiency and effectiveness of university programmes. Quality assurance includes regular self-evaluation as well as evidence of improvement and accountability as regards the use of public funds (Fresen, 2005:19).

According to the European University Association (EUA, 2007:22), the implications of these new developments for higher education raise the problem of “customer protection” and this problem is, in turn, associated with a lack of adequate information (and, therefore, transparency) available to the potential students, employers and competent national recognition authorities.

In particular, UNESCO (2002:2) and Shin and Harman (2009:1) identify *globalisation* and *massification* as the two megatrends that are influencing contemporary higher education with globalisation and the internalisation of higher education leading to the increasing international mobility of students. In addition, the growing internalisation of global markets has also placed new emphasis on quality, standards and the benchmarking of qualifications. Globalisation has, thus, brought forth a global wave of academic competitiveness (Chang, Wu, Ching & Tang, 2009:1). Furthermore, as has been indicated above, globalisation in higher education, as reflected in the growth of new information technologies, the prospective liberalisation of trade in educational services and the emergence of various forms of borderless education is at the heart of heated debates worldwide. Despite the fact that globalisation primarily emphasises economic phenomena, governments now regard education as an important service sector in international trade (Shin & Harman, 2009:2) with higher education being at the forefront of globalisation in the knowledge-based economy. In such an economy knowledge is the main determinant of economic competitiveness (Jonathan, 2000:45).

As regards the massification of higher education, the expansion of higher education from an élite system to a massified system has meant that educators and administrators now have to deal with a larger and more diverse student body (Fresen, 2005:19). Fresen (2005:19) also further argues that the development of mass higher education had led to a need for both accelerated innovation in terms of content and the teaching process, and for a better interface with both industry and society. This, in turn, requires systems of quality assurance that focus not only on the traditional parameters of quality, but also on innovative capacity and on actual, continuous innovations at all levels of the institutions concerned (Jonathan, 2000:46).

In Namibia, as in many countries throughout the world, there has been an increased recognition of the importance of quality higher education in national development. In its policy framework, entitled *Vision 2030*, the Government of the Republic of Namibia (GRN, 2004:1) acknowledges that higher education in Namibia plays a critical role in capacity building, professional training and socio-economic development in contributing to the realisation of *Vision 2030*, namely, to enable Namibia to attain standards of economic development which are comparable to those in the developed world. In 2004, Namibia adopted *Vision 2030*, a document that clearly spells out the country's development programmes and strategies aimed at achieving its national objectives. Vision 2030 focuses on the following themes in realising the country's long-term vision:

- Inequality and social welfare
- Human and resources development and institutional capacity building
- Macro-economic issues
- Population, health and development
- Namibia's natural resources sector
- Knowledge, information and technology
- Factors pertaining to the external environment (GRN, 2004:10).

In the *Vision 2030* document, the former president and founding father of the Namibian nation, Dr Sam Nujoma, states that “the goal of the vision is to improve the quality of life of the people of Namibia to the level of their counterparts in the developed world by 2030” (GRN, 2004:7). According to Dr Nujoma, “all these aspirations translate to people who enjoy high standards of living, a good quality of life and have access to quality education, health and other vital services” (GRN, 2004:7). Furthermore, the document states that the country will operate a totally integrated, unified, flexible and high quality education and training system that prepares Namibian learners to take advantage of a rapidly changing global environment, including developments in science and technology. The proposed capacity building will transform Namibia into a knowledge-based society in which changes in production and information technology will revolutionise all aspects of the manufacturing process and, thus, enable the country to become an industrial nation that may be ranked high among the developed countries of the world. The document identifies the following aspects as driving forces in terms of realising the objectives of *Vision 2030*:

- Education, science and technology
- Health and development
- Sustainable agriculture
- Peace and social justice
- Gender equality (GRN, 2004:10).

It emerges from the literature review that education, including higher education, is among the key driving forces for the realisation of *Vision 2030* (GRN, 2004:11). Against this background, one may assume that it is essential that the HEIs in Namibia provide high quality education to their students.

The pressures described in the above discussion illustrate the need for HEIs to pursue active involvement in quality assurance practices, in order to belie their image of exclusive “ivory towers” (Vroeijenstijn in Fresen, 2005:19). Traditional evaluation methods, such as the external moderation of examinations, are no longer sufficient to guarantee the quality of university programmes (Fresen, 2005:19). In addition, institutionalised quality assurance has become an unavoidable phenomenon and many HEIs throughout the world are now preoccupied with quality, quality assurance and evaluation (*cf.* Kasasa in Strydom & Van der Westhuizen, 2002:358). It may, thus, be argued that HEIs in Namibia must also develop internal quality assurance mechanisms, operating in all institutional areas at different levels, to ensure high academic standards, integrity and accountability, and, hence, to enable them to become internationally competitive.

### **1.3 RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY**

It is clear from the above discussion that quality assurance in higher education systems has, in the past years, become a global phenomenon. Most HEIs worldwide have now implemented functional quality assurance systems, based on self-evaluation operating in all institutional areas at different levels on a continuous cyclic basis, in response to the numerous challenges facing higher education today (*cf.* Griesel *et al.*, 2002:59). In its policy framework document, entitled *Education and Training Sector Improvement Programme* (ETSIP), the GRN (2007:2) states that “... at the current level of education, we will not be producing citizens who are capable of making Namibia a knowledge-based economy, as is expected of us in Vision 2030 ...” (see details in chapter 3).

The Namibian National Council for Higher Education (NCHE, 2007:17) also alleges that HEIs in Namibia have been offering programmes without the benefit of internationally benchmarked

quality standards. This, in turn, has created a quality vacuum in which certain institutions of higher education offer programmes of which the quality may be contested, while others offer programmes of which the quality is benchmarked against reputable regional and international quality assurance and management systems.

According to Strydom (in Fresen, 2005:6), the *South African Journal of Higher Education* is calling for more research into quality assurance in higher education, in particular, as regards the development and establishment of quality assurance frameworks and models which are uniquely relevant to the developing countries, and, in particular, to Africa.

A preliminary literature study on the existing quality assurance mechanisms in the Namibian HEIs identified that, apart from unpublished official documents, there is little information available on empirical studies on the internal quality assurance mechanisms existing in HEIs in Namibia. Accordingly, this study became imperative in closing the existing knowledge gap and addressing the lack of scientific research on quality assurance in higher education in Namibia. It is, thus, hoped that this study may make a meaningful contribution both to the field of higher education and to quality assurance in Namibia.

#### **1.4 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

According to the literature, quality assurance is a priority in higher education worldwide and it is, thus, essential that institutions develop internal mechanisms both to ensure offerings, services and activities of reputable quality, and to be better empowered to meet the challenges involved in the development of a knowledge-based economy (Friend-Pereira *et al.*, 2002:56; Materu, 2007:19).

The purpose of the study was twofold, namely:

- To map out and identify current internal quality assurance mechanisms in place in Namibian HEIs, and to investigate the development of institutional quality assurance systems/mechanisms in Namibian HEIs against the international best practices as identified in the literature
- To make recommendations aimed at the improvement of the practice of quality assurance in HEIs in Namibia. These recommendations are contained in a framework of best practices in the quality assurance of HEIs.

Nevertheless, this study, both recognises and acknowledges that there is no “blueprint” for quality assurance systems, and that HEIs are both unique and operate under a variety of circumstances. The framework devised is, therefore, both generic and non-prescriptive to avoid cloning HEIs and to allow them the opportunity to assess the suitability of the framework as regards their particular situations and then to customise it to provide the “best fit” within the context of individual institutions in meeting their individual needs and requirements. In addition, the framework took into account and incorporated international best practices in quality assurance in higher education. It is hoped that such a framework may improve the quality of higher education HEIs in Namibia, and enhance their international competitiveness.

### **1.5 STATEMENT OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM**

Quality in higher education is an increasingly contentious and debatable issue, not only as a result of the link between quality and government funding but, more importantly, because quality lies at the heart of academic work (Watty, 2006:24). The importance of formal quality assurance systems within HEIs is reflected in the literature, which suggests that clearly defined and effective quality assurance mechanisms are necessary in order to raise standards within higher education

(Long, Tricker, Rangercrof & Gilroy, 2000:4–6). As has been pointed out in the theoretical background to this study, quality assurance in HEIs is currently an international phenomenon, incorporating different approaches and applications.

The *massification* of higher education since the latter part of the 20th century has been driven by the increased *globalisation* and *internationalisation* following the breakdown of political barriers, the advent of a free market economy, the rapid development of Information Communication Technology (ICT) and the significant increase in the demand for higher education. According to the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), this rapid expansion of higher education opportunities, together with the exponential growth of private HEIs and different modes of studies, such as distance education and on-line education, have posed a threat to the quality of higher education in general (COL, 2009:3). According to COL, the challenge to HEIs is to allow greater access to higher education while, at the same time, sustaining a culture of continuous improvement in their research, teaching and community engagement functions. As Strydom *et al.* (1997:74) argue, it has been the cost of financing *equity* and increased *access*, in particular, which have resulted in the recasting of the value of the modern HEIs as regards performance and economic terms.

This, in turn, gave momentum to the development of the quality movement in higher education throughout the world from the 1980s onwards. These pressures have meant that quality assurance nowadays is no longer a choice in higher education (Strydom *et al.*, 1997:74).

These developments have urged HEIs to put in place mechanisms for quality assurance in order to ensure high academic standards, integrity and accountability. The literature analysis clearly highlights the need for HEIs to build quality assurance systems which appropriate to their own individual institutions (Fresen, 2005:7). Quality assurance has, thus, become a priority in higher education throughout the world (*cf.* Mukandala, 2007:iii). Accordingly, the development of formal

internal quality assurance mechanisms is no longer optional, but rather a requirement, if HEIs wish to ensure high academic standards, integrity and accountability and, subsequently, to enhance their global competitiveness (*cf.* Friend-Pereira *et al.*, 2002:7; Materu, 2007:45).

As has been mentioned in section 1.3 above, there is little information available in the literature on the internal quality assurance mechanisms existing in HEIs in Namibia. It is, thus, within this context that this study was conceived and carried out. In particular, the study was conducted in order to evaluate the current quality assurance mechanisms used by HEIs in Namibia, and, based on the findings, to make recommendations aimed at the improvement of the practice of quality assurance in HEIs in Namibia.

In view of the background, rationale, and purpose of the study, the key research questions in respect of which the study was aiming to find answers may be summarised as follows: ***What are the internal quality assurance mechanisms in place in HEIs in Namibia? What may be said about the implementation stage of these mechanisms, and are there areas for potential improvement?***

## **1.6 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The objectives of this study included the following:

- Conduct a conceptual analysis of institutional quality assurance mechanisms and systems within the context of higher education with the emphasis on internal quality assurance as regards HEIs.
- Establish whether quality assurance has been institutionalised at HEIs in Namibia.

- Identify formal internal quality assurance mechanisms in place in the HEIs in Namibia, while paying particular attention to the way in which these institutions have implemented international best practices, as identified in the literature review.
- Identify challenges facing the HEIs in Namibia as regards the implementation of these mechanisms.
- Draw conclusions from the findings of the study as well as make recommendations based on the findings and develop a framework for best practice in an attempt to improve internal quality assurance practice.

## **1.7 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Six sub-questions were formulated in an effort to come to unbiased answers to the key research questions identified in section 1.5. It is hoped that, by answering these sub-questions, it will be possible to arrive at an overall answer to the main research question. These research sub-questions included the following:

- What is the conceptual framework for quality assurance within the context of higher education in Namibia?
- What kind of examples may be showcased from the literature in order to demonstrate either best practices in quality assurance or the challenges involved in the implementation quality assurance?
- What are the key requirements for effective internal quality assurance mechanisms which may ensure best practice in HEIs in Namibia?
- How are the HEIs in Namibia implementing quality assurance?
- What formal internal quality assurance mechanisms may be identified in the Namibian public and private HEIs and how fully deployed are these mechanisms?

- What processes do these institutions have in place to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of these mechanisms?
- What are these institutions' priorities as regards their improvement?

It is worth underlining that the main focus of this study is the formal quality assurance mechanisms in place in the HEIs in Namibia as well as the progress that these HEIs have made in implementing these mechanisms. In addition, the study also intends presenting and disseminating examples of international best practices in internal quality assurance in these HEIs.

### **1.8 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY AND POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE**

This study addressed an important issue of concern in higher education in Namibia as it was the first study of its kind in Namibia. In addition, the study was benchmarked with best practice literature encompassing the global arena. The value of this study may be found in the endeavour to address the possible gap with regard to existing quality assurance mechanisms and processes in the HEIs in Namibia. It is, furthermore, hoped that the study will make a meaningful contribution to the establishment and improvement of quality assurance in a relatively "young" higher education system in Africa as well as enhance the awareness of a national quality assurance system in higher education practices in order to improve quality levels in Namibian HEIs.

The value of the study is also to be found in the fact that it offers research findings that are not only of interest to but which will, hopefully, attract the attention of, higher education administrators, decision makers and those who are charged with the responsibility of higher education policy making. Accordingly, this study will not only make available much needed

information to HEIs in Namibia but, hopefully, also to government, policy makers, and development partners.

The study addressed the issue of *continuous improvement* and *accountability* in HEIs in Namibia as this would be to the benefit of students, parents, and other stakeholders in higher education in Namibia. In view of the fact that the study drew on information which had been gathered from some countries worldwide, the framework that was developed and suggested for HEIs in Namibia encompasses quality assurance practices from the international scene.

Students would benefit from quality higher education that enjoys national recognition and international comparability; while society would benefit from employable graduates who are adapted to the fast changing technology and knowledge-based economic world.

Finally, it is hoped that the study will stimulate debates on quality assurance in higher education in Namibia, and empower researchers to participate in related studies.

### **1.9 DELIMITATION OF THE SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

The introduction of quality assurance systems in higher education may be treated in different ways, using different methodologies and approaches. In addition, quality may be addressed at different levels, for example, the level of course, programme/curriculum, departmental and/or institutional, and using different tools (internal and external); including self-assessment and accreditation procedures, evaluation, quality management tools, and peer reviews, etc. (Friend-Pereira *et al.*, 2002:7). It is, thus, not possible to conduct a study of this magnitude without limiting the scope of the study. The field of study in this research project is quality assurance and higher education and, as such, the study it confined itself to degree-granting HEIs with university

status in Namibia. Three institutions participated in this study, namely, a public university, a private university and a polytechnic. This does not, however, imply that quality assurance is not important in non-degree granting institutions without a university status.

There are different types of public and private HEIs in Namibia, including universities, a polytechnic, colleges and vocational training centres. The universities and the polytechnic are degree-granting institutions with a university status, while the others offer programmes leading to qualifications up to diploma level. Public institutions have been granted the statutory autonomy necessary to provide assurances about the quality of their programmes and qualifications. Private institutions, on the other hand, are required to comply with accreditation standards if they wish to offer recognised qualifications. There are, however, some private institutions which are operating without having been accredited by a recognised quality assurance agency in Namibia.

The focus of this study is the mechanisms which are involved in the assurance of quality in all institutional areas, including teaching and learning, research and scholarship, community service and support services.

### **1.10 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

This section discusses certain issues and limitations regarding the study. Firstly, the literature on quality assurance focuses mainly on quality assurance mechanisms in various countries in the world and there is little empirical information about quality assurance in higher education in Namibia.

Secondly, the study was constrained by both time and a lack of funds, thus making it difficult to include other key stakeholders in higher education in Namibia, for example, national quality

assurance agencies – Namibia Qualifications Authority (NQA), National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) – and employers. As a result, the perspectives of industry and interested stakeholders in the community as regards quality assurance in HEIs in Namibia were not sought, although their inputs may have contributed more meaning to the study. These shortcomings limited an in depth investigation of the aspects being investigated. For example, it was not possible to explore quality assurance in higher education in Namibia at a national level.

Thirdly, a system approach that focuses on quality assurance at institutional level has its own disadvantages in the sense that it lacks a direct check of the real life quality of individual programmes and activities. It must be borne in mind that the mere presence of quality assurance systems does not necessarily mean that quality exists. In addition, the exact nature of the impact of quality assurance systems on student learning has not been explored and this issue requires further research.

## **1.11 CLARIFICATION OF TERMS**

Materu (2007:3) is of the opinion that the terms used in quality assurance are employed in a variety of ways and they may, thus, have different meanings in different countries and institutions, not to mention as regards different stakeholders and individuals. It is in this context that it becomes extremely important both to define the quality assurance related terms and concepts used in this study in order to clarify their meanings. The following key terms were used in this study:

### ***1.11.1 Internal quality assurance***

In this study, *internal quality assurance* refers to the policies and mechanisms implemented in an institution or programme to ensure that the institution or programme is fulfilling its purposes and

meeting the standards that apply to higher education, in general, or to the profession or discipline, in particular (AU, 2008:4).

### ***1.11.2 External quality assurance***

In this study, *external quality assurance* refers to a range of quality monitoring and quality assurance procedures that are undertaken by bodies outside of academic institutions in order to determine whether the institutions are meeting agreed upon or predetermined quality standards (AU, 2008:4).

### ***1.11.3 Peer reviewer***

In this study, a *peer reviewer* refers to a person who is professionally equal in calibre and subject specialisation to those delivering the academic programme or providing higher education, but who is not from the same institution, nor has any other conflict of interest, and who may contribute to the review of an educational programme, either as regards internal quality assurance or for accreditation purposes (Materu, 2007:3).

### ***1.11.4 Performance indicators***

UNESCO (2002:39) defines *performance indicators* as a range of statistical parameters representing a measure of the extent to which a higher education institution or a programme is performing in a certain quality dimension. Performance indicators are both qualitative and quantitative measures of either the output (short-term measures of results) or the outcome (long-term measures of outcomes and impacts) of a system or a programme. Performance indicators allow HEIs to benchmark their own performances or else they enable comparisons between these institutions.

### **1.11.5 Quality**

Harvey and Green (1993:11) suggest the following five broad approaches to defining *quality* in higher education, namely, exceptional, perfection, fitness for and of purpose, value for money, and transformation.

### **1.11.6 Quality assessment**

In this study, *quality assessment* refers to the process of systematically gathering, quantifying and using information with a view to judging the effectiveness of the quality assurance mechanisms of a higher education institution (institutional assessment), or its educational programmes (programme assessment) (Vlăsceanu, Grünberg & Pârlea, 2007:29). In other words, quality assessment entails every structured activity which leads to a judgement of the quality of teaching, learning, and/or research, whether self-assessment or assessment by external experts. It emerged from the literature review that terms such as assessment, evaluation and review are used interchangeably in quality assurance (UNESCO, 2007:20).

### **1.11.7 Quality assurance**

In the context of this study, *quality assurance* is an all-embracing term referring to an on-going, continuous process of evaluating (assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining, and improving) the quality of a higher education system, institution, or programme (Vlăsceanu *et al.*, 2007:74).

### **1.11.8 Quality assurance mechanisms**

*Quality assurance mechanisms* in the context of this study refer to the availability of procedures for the systematic, internal assessments of a programme or an institution as a whole with the

intention of maintaining and improving the quality of higher education. In addition, in the context of this study, assessment methods as well as the dissemination of and follow-up on assessment results (ENQA, 2005:20).

#### **1.11.9 Quality audit**

*Quality audit* refers to the process of examining institutional procedures in order to assure quality and standards as well as to ascertain whether the quality assurance arrangements are being implemented effectively and realising the stated objectives. In other words, a quality audit is a process of quality assessment in terms of which an external body evaluates an institution's quality assurance systems to determine whether they are both adequate and effective. A quality audit investigates the system in terms of whether the system is achieving good quality but it does not investigate the quality itself. A quality audit may be performed only by persons (i.e. quality auditors) who are not directly involved in the institution being audited. Quality audits are undertaken in order to meet either internal goals (internal audit) or external goals (external audits). The results of the audit must be documented in an audit report (Vlăsceanu *et al.*, 2007:77).

#### **1.11.10 Quality culture**

The notion of *quality culture* is understood in this study as comprising two distinct sets of elements, namely, "[s]hared values, beliefs, expectations and commitments towards quality" and "a structural/managerial element with defined processes that enhance quality and aim at coordinating efforts" (EUA, 2011:9).

### **1.11.11 Quality enhancement**

*Quality enhancement* in the context of this study refers to the process of taking deliberate steps to bring about a continual improvement in the effectiveness of the learning experience of students. In other words, quality enhancement is the process of positively changing activities in order to provide for a continuous improvement in the quality of the higher education provided (Friend-Pereira *et al.*, 2002:7).

### **1.11.12 Quality management**

*Quality management* refers to the complete process which is set up in order to ensure that the quality process actually takes place and is an aggregate of measures taken regularly at system or institutional level so as to assure the quality of higher education with the emphasis on improving the quality of higher education. As a generic term, it covers all those activities that ensure the fulfilment of the quality policy as well as the quality objectives and responsibilities. Accordingly, quality management involves the implementation of the quality policy and quality objectives and responsibilities through quality planning, quality control, quality assurance, and quality improvement mechanisms (Vlăsceanu *et al.*, 2007:76).

### **1.11.13 Quality management system**

In the context of this study a *quality management system* (QMS) may be defined as a set of policies, processes and procedures required for the planning and execution of teaching, research, community engagement and services activities (the core business area of a higher education institution) in order to ensure that a degree of excellence is achieved. A QMS integrates the various internal processes within a higher education institution and aims at providing a process approach for the execution of all institutional activities. In addition, a QMS enables the institution

to identify, measure, control and improve the various core business processes (teaching, research, community engagement and services) that will ultimately lead to improved institutional performance (Vlăsceanu *et al.*, 2007:77).

## **1.12 RESEARCH DESIGN AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

A brief description of the research approach, research design and methods used in the study is presented in this section to inform the reader about both the points of departure used in the study, and the ways in which the study was approached and conducted.

### **1.12.1 Research design**

A research design refers to the plan or blueprint indicating the way in which a research study will be conducted (Mouton in Bezuidenhout, 2005:45). This study was purely a qualitative study while a multi-method research methodology was employed. The study commenced with a literature study, followed by a document analysis of the existing quality related documentation of the relevant HEIs. This was followed by a phenomenological, explorative and descriptive research process which aimed at identifying the true meaning of the quality assurance mechanisms and systems in the various HEIs in Namibia. This design provided the researcher with an opportunity of understanding the phenomenon as it unfolded in the natural setting during the enquiry. The methodology used was based on an improvement-oriented evaluation.

### **1.12.2 Research approach**

A qualitative, phenomenological approach was used. According to the phenomenological approach a problem must be investigated within the context in which it exists, as it is not possible to divorce human behaviour from its context. In other words, the phenomenologist endeavours

to understand a phenomenon from the perspective of those involved (Huysamen in Bezuidenhout, 2005:44). Leedy (1997:161) defines phenomenology as “a research method that attempts to understand participants’ perspectives and views of social realities”. In phenomenological studies, the researcher often has personal experience of the phenomenon and aims to heighten his/her own awareness of the experience, while at the same time examining the experience through the eyes of the other participants (Leedy, 1997:161). In this study, the researcher’s own experience as an interviewer, institutional document analyst as well as the interviewer conducting the focus group discussion, formed the basis and served as preparation for the investigation of the phenomenon under study.

### **1.12.3 Literature study**

An extensive literature review of both internet-based and printed sources on quality assurance mechanisms and procedures worldwide was undertaken, while information thus acquired served as the premise for the study on quality assurance in HEIs in Namibia. This literature review comprised the first phase of the data collection. The researcher was of the belief that reviewing and analysing international literature on internal quality assurance in higher education would help in identifying best practices that may be integrated in the framework to be developed and, thus, ensure international comparability. Accordingly, the aim of the literature study was to obtain a conceptual framework for quality assurance in higher education, to create a common understanding of the definitions of concepts related to quality assurance in higher education, and to identify and study current international best practice with the intention of integrating these in the planned framework.

#### **1.12.4 Population and sampling**

The larger group of individuals that a researcher wishes to investigate is termed a population, while the smaller group that a researcher actually studies is termed a sample (*cf.* Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007:166). In this study, the population comprised all degree granting HEIs in Namibia. A purposeful sampling technique was employed to select the research participants from the institutions selected. The participants in the interviews consisted of key officials in the institutions selected, including top management, directors/managers of various departments, deans, heads of academic departments, other staff members, and student representatives. The sample for the individual interviews comprised forty-five participants.

Staff from the selected institutions who are responsible for overseeing the quality assurance systems of these institutions, namely, quality assurance managers and coordinators or equivalent persons, were requested to be part of the focus group panel intentionally. The sample of the focus group comprised ten participants.

#### **1.12.5 Data collection**

In this empirical study the data were collected by means of personal interviews, institutional document analyses, and a focus group discussion (explorative design) (*cf.* Bezuidenhout, 2005:47).

##### **1.12.5.1 Individual interviews**

Individual interviews are generally used in order to obtain an idea of a participant's beliefs or perceptions as regards a particular topic (Greeff in Bezuidenhout, 2005:47). In this second phase of data collection, semi-structured personal interviews with individuals were used in order to

obtain information on the opinions and views of the participants regarding the phenomenon under study. The participants comprised key officials in the selected institutions including top management; directors/managers of various departments, deans, head of academic departments, ordinary staff members, and student representatives.

#### **1.12.5.2 Institutional document analyses**

The researcher used the institutional document analysis as a triangulation mechanism to serve as recorded evidence to verify and validate the data collected via the interviews. Written communications of various types which included, but were not limited to, official records, letters, minutes of meetings, diaries, and reports, as well as the published institutional documents such as policies, procedures, guidelines, and operational manuals were analysed (*cf.* Hoepfl, 1997:6).

#### **1.12.5.3 Focus group discussion**

The focus group discussion served as a further triangulation process. This three-fold approach, namely, individual interviews, institutional document analyses and focus group discussions, was adopted to allow the triangulation that would ensure proper data collection and information validation (*cf.* De Vos in Bezuidenhout, 2005:47).

#### **1.12.6 Data analysis**

The main purpose of the data analysis was both to organise the data into categories and to identify patterns in these categories through an induction process. In accordance with Best and Kahn's suggestion (2006:270), three steps were followed in analysing, organising, describing, and interpreting the data. Firstly, the research findings were described and interpreted in a written narrative form – in accordance with the qualitative reporting style – in order to make the narrative meaningful to the readers. Secondly, the results were then discussed and interpreted

and, thirdly, conclusions were drawn and recommendations made based on the findings from the study.

### **1.13 ETHICS**

The respondents were informed of the nature and purpose of the study, that participation was voluntary and that they were free to decide to terminate their participation or to withdraw at any point during the research process. All individuals who participated in the study signed a consent form expressing their willingness to participate.

Where required, anonymity was ensured and responses treated with a high level of confidentiality (*cf.* Groenewald, 2004:20). Code numbers were used to distinguish the responses of the participants while the names, addresses, and other identifying information related to the participants were not directly associated with any information obtained from them. A master list of the individuals participating in the study and their identifying information was kept in a secure location and, when the results of the study were reported, the names of the participants and other identifying information were not used.

### **1.14 TRUSTWORTHINESS, RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY**

Newby (2010:120) argues that trustworthiness, reliability and validity are the cornerstones of any research study. Accordingly, the researcher must always make sure that the information that he/she gathers represents the situation that was intended to be examined and, if other researchers were to investigate the situation using the same approach, the results would be the same (Newby, 2010:120). In this study, trustworthiness, reliability and validity were achieved through the prolonged engagement of the researcher with the research process, through triangulation – using interviews and document analyses to support the verbal responses collected

by means of the questionnaires – and through the focus group discussion with experts and experienced participants in order to validate and adapt the findings.

#### **1.14.1 Trustworthiness**

According to Lincoln and Guba (in Bezuidenhout, 2005:192), it is essential that any enquirer persuade the reader that the findings of a study are worth considering by taking cognisance of the following questions: How trustworthy are the findings? How valid are the findings? How reliable or consistent/dependable are the findings? Groenewald (2004:21) emphasises the truth-value of qualitative research and lists a number of ways in which to achieve truth. In this study, the phenomenological research design contributed towards the truth. In other words, the focus was on an insider perspective.

#### **1.14.2 Reliability**

Joppe (2000:1) defines reliability as the extent to which results are consistent over time while an accurate representation of the total population under study is referred to as reliability. In addition, if it is possible to reproduce the results of a study using a similar methodology, then the research instrument is considered to be reliable. However, such an approach makes it more difficult to establish reliability and contributes to the challenges of interpretation that are central to the qualitative approach. Such an approach also places considerable emphasis on the validity of a study. In this phenomenological study, it was assumed that no two interview encounters would ever be the same. In other words, even if the same interviewer were to ask the same questions to the same respondent on another day, the answer may be slightly different depending on the contextual factors, including contact with other people or experiences that may have shaped the interviewee's views. However, this does not mean that there is no baseline for examining whether or not a statement is a reliable representation of a person's views or a

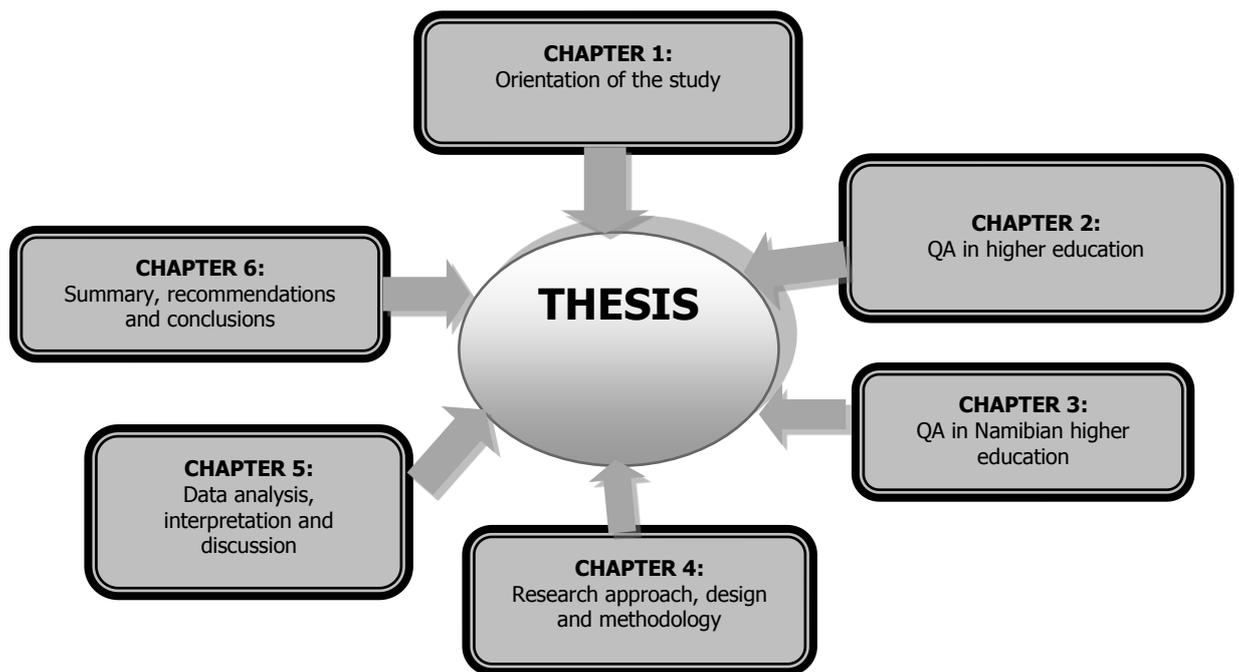
trustworthy account of the person's experiences. It simply recognises that it is essential that all such self-reports be understood as being constructed within a specific context and for a particular audience (*cf.* Clark, 1999:6).

### **1.14.3 Validity**

Clark (1999:6) points out that "in qualitative research approaches, the validity of a study is not determined with reference to scientific methods or a study's replicability, but on how a given interpretation may be judged". Is the study thorough, coherent, and comprehensive? Does it make sense, or does it ring true? Is it useful? In particular, is the interpretation provocative and generative of further inquiry? If a study meets these criteria, it may be said to be valid. In order to ensure validity, this qualitative study took into consideration the context of those who were the subject of the inquiry – the respondents – and it offered a promising analysis of why and how the phenomenon had occurred as well as rendering the narratives meaningful for people (*cf.* Clark, 1999:6).

## **1.15 OUTLINE OF THE THESIS LAYOUT**

The purpose of this subsection is to provide a brief overview of the thesis in a diagrammatic form. The thesis that resulted from this study comprises six chapters. Figure 1.1 presents a diagrammatic overview of the thesis layout.



**Figure 1.1: Visual representation of the thesis layout**

### **Chapter 1: Orientation to the study**

Chapter 1 is the introductory chapter that provides the background to the study, as well as discussing the rationale, research problem, research objectives, significance of the study, scope and limitations of the study and clarifying the terms used in the study.

### **Chapter 2: Quality assurance in higher education**

This chapter reports on the literature related to quality assurance in higher education in the global context.

### **Chapter 3: Quality assurance in Namibian higher education**

This chapter reports on the literature appropriate to quality assurance in higher education in both the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) and Namibian context.

## **Chapter 4: Research approach, design and methodology**

In this chapter the research approach, research design, and methodology used to collect and analyse the data are discussed.

## **Chapter 5: Data analysis, interpretation and discussion**

This chapter reports on the data analysis, interpretation and discussion.

## **Chapter 6: Summary, recommendations and conclusions**

This chapter ties together the findings of the study by summarising the findings, making recommendations aimed at the improvement of the practice of quality assurance in higher education in Namibia, and drawing conclusions. The recommendations are contained in the proposed framework for best practice in quality assurance in HEIs in Namibia (Annexure A).

### **1.16 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

The literature studied reveals that quality assurance in HEIs is a phenomenon which is currently attracting international attention, with a variety of approaches and applications being used. Research on quality assurance in higher education has, thus, become increasingly important. Globalisation, internalisation and massification were identified in the literature as some of the principal factors influencing the direction of higher education reform and, hence, the quest for quality assurance in higher education.

Most HEIs worldwide have now, in response to the numerous challenges facing higher education today, implemented functional quality assurance systems based on self-evaluation operating in all institutional areas at different levels on a continuous cyclic basis (*cf.* Griesel *et al.*, 2002:59). However, there is little information available in the literature on internal quality assurance

mechanisms in HEIs in Namibia. Clearly, as portrayed by the significant lack of empirical studies in the literature, research into quality assurance in higher education in Namibia is in its infancy. Accordingly, it has not yet been established what the HEIs in Namibia are doing in response to international trends in higher education. This state of affairs has justified the need for scientific research in this field in a quest to ensure sufficient quality assurance and "scientific" rigour in the field within the Namibian context.

The aim of this chapter was to provide the background against which this research study was conducted. Accordingly, the chapter discussed the theoretical background for the study, the rationale for the study, problem statement, study objectives, research questions, as well as the scope and limitations of the study. The chapter also briefly outlined the research approach, research design and the methodology used to collect the data.

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the quality assurance mechanisms currently being used by HEIs in Namibia, and, based on the findings, to make recommendations aimed at the improvement of the practice of quality assurance in higher education in Namibia, should this be found necessary. These recommendations are presented in a framework for best practice in quality assurance in HEIs in Namibia, presented in Chapter 6 and Annexure A.

An extensive literature study of quality assurance mechanisms and procedures in some countries in the worldwide was undertaken, with the information acquired serving as the premise for this study of quality assurance in HEIs in Namibia.

The next two chapters (chapters 2 and 3) focus on the literature review.

## CHAPTER 2

### QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

*The quality of a country's higher education sector and its definition, assessment and monitoring is a key not only to its social and economic well-being, but it is also a determining factor in the status of that higher education system at international level. The establishment of quality assurance systems has become a necessity, not only for monitoring quality in higher education internally, but also for engaging in delivery of higher education internationally (OECD in NCHE, 2007:25).*

#### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

Higher education plays an extremely important role in the social and economic development of countries (Wahab, 2010:296). In order to measure the effectiveness of the higher education sector, quality assurance and assessment have become an integral part of higher education throughout the world with the attention of education policy makers in recent years being focused on institutional performance, including quality assurance (Kettunen, 2009:2). According to Kettunen (2009), there has been an increase in the number of quality assurance units at institutional level responsible for internal quality as well as an increase in the number of newly created quality assurance agencies evaluating quality from the perspective of external agents. There is, furthermore, a firm belief among the relevant role players that quality higher education makes a significant contribution to economic competitiveness and welfare in a global, knowledge-based economy.

Throughout the world, quality assurance has become an increasingly dominant theme in higher education in recent years, with international best practices playing an important role in the way in which quality assurance is interpreted and implemented (European Commission Tempus, 2009:7).

According to the Commonwealth of Learning, assuring the quality of the higher education provided is a fundamental aspect of ensuring the credibility of programmes, institutions and national systems of higher education worldwide (COL, 2010:2). It would, however, be a mistake to deduce from this increasing preoccupation that quality has not previously been an issue for HEIs. Excellence has always been a cornerstone of academia, but the quest for quality has acquired a new urgency in recent years. The main drivers of change in higher education and the incentives for introducing a new paradigm for quality assurance systems and processes may be identified as the growth in student numbers, a recognition that higher education and skills levels are vital for the economic, political and social development of countries, and the understanding that higher education has become an international and competitive market area. These are some of the factors that have contributed to the need for greater *transparency* and *consistency* in quality assurance (European Commission Tempus, 2009:7).

Despite consensus on the importance of quality assurance, the way in which the quality of higher education may be assured and standards of teaching and research maintained is an issue that continues to confront HEIs around the world (Gallagher, 2010:30). This chapter reports on the literature on quality assurance in higher education and discusses how HEIs in various countries have addressed this topic. Current mechanisms for best practices in internal quality assurance in HEIs are identified. These examples of international best practices form the premise for this study of quality assurance in HEIs in Namibia. The following two research questions are addressed in this chapter, namely:

- What is the conceptual framework for quality assurance within the context of higher education in Namibia?
- What kind of examples may be showcased from the literature to demonstrate either best practices in quality assurance or the challenges involved in the implementation of quality assurance?

The research questions cited above were addressed, firstly, by undertaking a study of quality assurance related topics in the existing literature. The purpose of this literature review was to investigate the key aspects and concepts in the literature related to quality assurance in higher education. The ultimate goal was to formulate definitions of quality assurance related concepts suitable for this study, and to identify best practices which would form the basis for criteria for the evaluation of quality as well as set a benchmark for the development of a framework for best practice in quality assurance in HEIs in Namibia – see chapter 5.

## **2.2 OPERATIONALISATION OF QUALITY AND QUALITY ASSURANCE CONCEPTS**

In this research study certain concepts have been used. Nevertheless, in order to understand fully the nature and meaning of these concepts, it is necessary to elaborate on them further, on the basis of the findings of the literature study. As regards most of these concepts definitions have been given in section 1.11, under “clarification of terms”. However, for the purpose of this chapter on the literature review, the concepts of quality and quality assurance only are explained as they are regarded as core concepts in this study.

### **2.2.1 Defining quality**

Since the late 1990s, the concept of quality has been uppermost in most higher education agendas, both nationally and internationally (Vidovich, 1999:7). However, as a concept, *quality* has been defined differently by various stakeholders (Watty, 2006:24). The reason for this is that quality is multi-dimensional and it also means different things to different people. Accordingly, quality has become a much debated concept, and there is widespread ambiguity about exactly what is meant by the concept of “quality” (Watty, 2006:24). Thus, defining *quality*, especially when the intention is to use the definition as a definitive framework for benchmarking quality in higher education, is problematic (McMillan & Parker, 2005:2).

Stephenson (2003:2) observes that "many people admit that they are able to recognize quality when they see it, but find it almost impossible to define it". Harvey and Newton (2004:121) suggest that this difficulty arises as a result of the fact that conceptions of quality are both personal and socially constructed. Furthermore, they argue that each stakeholder constructs a view of quality based on a few attributes only and that these selected attributes vary from one stakeholder to another (Harvey & Newton, 2004:119). In other words, the criteria for the selection of attributes are based on personal values and judgements (Watty, 2003:214).

Newby (2010:115) argues that quality as a concept in higher education is a highly debated phenomenon. In addition, it is a notion that challenges the status quo in pursuit of change for the better and, hence, disturbs the equilibrium of established professors who believe in what has worked for them for decades (Barnett, 1992:16). For these professors what has worked for them is the only means to excellence. A word as a concept is sometimes relegated to dictionary meaning by academics. As regards quality this is often caused by a lack of knowledge about the scholarly body of theories that celebrate quality in today's definition of dynamics for higher education. According to the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA), every individual who ponders on quality and quality assurance is forced to confront the question: "What is quality?" (IUCEA, 2008a:5). The debates on the phenomenon take different forms with many of the discussions on quality starting with this exciting quotation (Pirsing, 1999:184):

Quality ... you know what it is, yet you don't know what it is. But that's self-contradictory. But some things are better than others, that is, they have more quality. But when you try to say what the quality is, apart from the things that have it, it all goes poof! There's nothing to talk about it. But, if you can't say what quality is, how do you know what it is, or how do you know that it even exists? If no one knows what it is, then for all practical purposes, it doesn't exist at all. But for all practical purposes it really does exist ... so round and round you

go, spinning mental wheels and nowhere finding anyplace to get traction. What the hell is quality? What is it?"

However, despite these reflections by Pirsing, there have been numerous books and articles written endeavouring to discover the nature of quality. But quality is like love. Everybody talks about it and knows what he/she is talking about. Everybody knows and feels when there is love, and recognises it but, when trying to define it, they are left standing empty-handed. The same applies to the concept of quality. There is no consensus on the concept. Quality is, thus, a relative concept and no absolute definition of quality exists because, just like beauty, quality is in the eyes of the beholder (IUCEA, 2008d:5).

Aino (in Strydom *et al.*, 1997:76) proposes similar arguments on quality as a concept when he claims that: "Quality is a most elusive notion. Virtually everybody recognises it when it is seen but scarcely anyone can specify its components or features with any degree of precision or confidence."

Nevertheless, the IUCEA (2008c:5) argues that, despite these confusions, when discussing quality and quality assurance, it is important to speak the same language. In other words, people must understand each other and they must have a shared idea about quality.

### **2.2.2 Quality in higher education**

The term *quality* in higher education is often ambiguous. It is often used as a type of short hand to represent different understandings of what the essential components of quality are, and what the best methods may be of either creating or guaranteeing the existence of these essential components (Bouton & Lucas, 2008:57). According to Bouton and Lucas (2008:57), while the

general concept of quality is, itself, a difficult concept, quality in higher education is far more confusing, because it is not always clear what the "product" is and who the "client" is. Is the "graduate" the "product" that HEIs offer society and the labour market, or is the graduate to be, the student, a "client", and the programme that is offered the "product"? It may, therefore, be argued that HEIs have multiple product systems and multi-client systems (IUCEA, 2008c:5).

According to Mishra (2007:11), one of the main reasons why quality and quality assurance in higher education are more complicated than in industry is because there are so many players in the field. There are numerous stakeholders in higher education and all the stakeholders, including government, employers, academics, students, parents, and society at large have their own ideas with each stakeholder conceptualising quality in a different way (IUCEA, 2008a:5).

Harvey and Green (1993:11–27) define quality as *exception or excellence*, as *perfection or consistency*, as *fitness for purpose*, as *fitness of purpose*, as *value for money*, and as *transformation*.

- The *exceptional* or *excellence* view perceives quality as something special. This is a traditional perception of quality and is associated with the notion of providing a product or service that is distinctive and special, and which confers status on the owner or user. In other words, this notion views quality as distinctive, as embodied in excellence, and as meeting a minimum set of standards (Harvey & Green, 1993:11–27). Traditionally, quality refers to something which is distinctive and elitist, and, thus, in educational terms, quality is linked to notions of excellence, of "high quality" – unattainable by the majority. Accordingly, in this context, quality as excellence refers to the traditional view of HEIs of referring to the goal of being "the best and special", or of achieving and maintaining exceptionally high standards of academic achievement. However, this view may not be appropriate to mass

higher education systems, since it may lead to exclusivity and elitism as excellence, by definition, is attained by a few only (Parri, 2006:107).

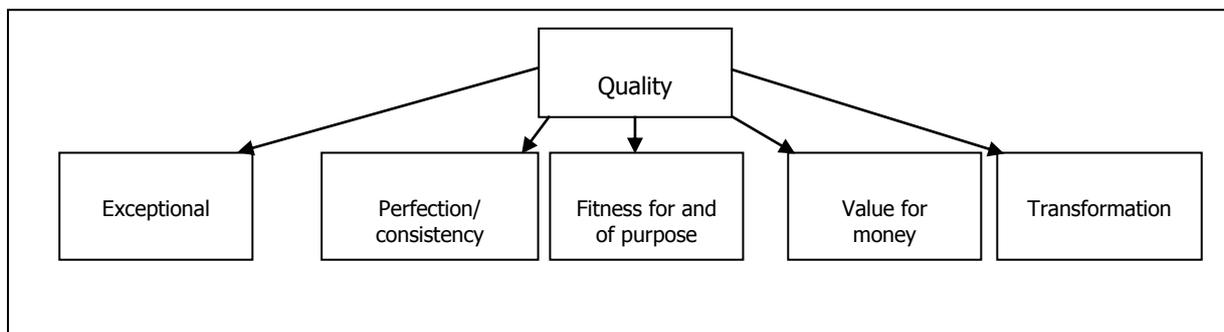
- The notion of quality as *perfection* or *consistency/conformance to a specification or standard* perceives quality in terms of a consistent or flawless outcome (Harvey & Green, 1993:11–27). This approach has its origin in the notion of *quality control* in the manufacturing industry, in terms of which quality refers to “zero errors or defects”. It is, thus, a basis measurement, a neutral term used to describe a required characteristic of a product or service (Green, 1994:13). Perfection focuses on zero defects, on getting things right the first time. In other words, the focus is on process as opposed to inputs and outputs. In a sense this notion “democratises” the notion of quality and, if it were possible to achieve consistency, then it would be possible to attain quality. Thus, in this sense, the educational processes would involve specifications through a zero defect approach and a quality culture. The limitations, however, lie in achieving consistent standards and in conformity to those standards (Ali & Shastri, 2010:10).
- The definition of *quality* which is adopted by most analysts and policy makers in higher education is that of *fitness for purpose* (Redder, 2010:26). The exponents of this approach argue that quality has no meaning except in relation to the purpose of the product or service. Accordingly, quality is judged in terms of the extent to which a product or service meets its stated purpose(s). In other words, quality as fitness for purpose perceives quality in terms of fulfilling customer specifications, minimum-based fitness for purpose and customer satisfaction. Theoretically, the customer specifies the requirements (Harvey & Green, 1993:11–27). However, the concept of customer satisfaction is more appropriate in industry than in higher education as, in higher education, this concept of customer satisfaction may ignore the fact that what students “want” may not be the same as what they “need” as needs

are not the same as wants. In addition, a student is also a complex entity as he/she has a dual nature as both customer and product and, hence, quality may not be applicable in such a straightforward way to the context of higher education where the student may also be viewed as a customer. Nevertheless, this notion of quality is regarded as most appropriate to higher education today, as it relates quality to a purpose which is defined by the provider (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002:19–22). The quality of an institution is judged against its own stated mission and objectives and by assessing to what extent the intended outcomes are being achieved with the main outcomes including the achievements of graduates, research outputs, and community engagement activities. In addition, this definition takes into account the diversity of higher education missions and provisions (Parri, 2006:108).

- Quality as *fitness of purpose* focuses on the defined objectives and mission of the institution or programme with no check on the fitness of the processes themselves in regard to any external objectives or expectations. In other words, fitness of purpose evaluates whether the quality-related actions of an institution are adequate (Vlăsceanu *et al.*, 2007:74).
- Quality as *value for money* perceives quality in terms of a return on investment or expenditure through efficiency and effectiveness (Harvey & Green, 1993:11). This notion focuses on efficiency and effectiveness, measuring outputs against inputs. In other words, if it is possible to achieve the same outcome at the same cost, then the “customer” has a quality product or service. Accordingly, quality, in this context, is linked to the notion of accountability to public expenditure. The growing tendency for governments to require accountability from higher education reflects a value for money approach while students, parents and higher education funders consider “value for money” as regards their own investments as quality (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002:19).

- Quality as *transformation* perceives quality as a “qualitative change”, a fundamental change of form. Transformation means change from one state to another with added value. However, transformation is not restricted to apparent or physical transformation but also includes cognitive transcendence. Thus, in educational terms, transformation refers to the enhancement and empowerment of students or the development of knowledge and skills with education being about doing something to the student as opposed to something for the consumer (Harvey & Green, 1993:11). Accordingly, education is an ongoing process of transformation that includes the empowerment and enhancement of the student who may be regarded as the customer of higher education (Ali & Shastri, 2010:10). Quality, as transformation, includes the concepts of enhancing and empowering – the democratisation of the process, and not merely the outcomes. Transformation is, thus, assessed with regard to the goal of empowering students through giving them knowledge and skills (IUCEA, 2008c:9; Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002:19-22).

The definitions discussed above are summarised in Figure 2.1.



Source: Watty (2003:215)

**Figure 2.1: Definitions of quality in higher education**

Watty (2003:214) argues that these apparently separate categories of quality have the “potential to overlap at the margin” and that it is not possible to classify stakeholder conceptions of quality

as simplistically into one of the five categories only. However, Lomas (2002:16) suggests that the Harvey and Green (1993) categories may be viewed as a matrix for defining quality.

On the other hand, Lučin (2005:215) suggests that, in creating a framework for understanding the conceptions of quality in higher education, the dimension of quality as “perfection/consistency” may be removed from the Harvey and Green (1993) categories, since higher education does not aim to produce standardised graduates, free from defects. According to Harvey and Green (1993), the notion of “zero defects” entails minimising variability and conforming perfectly to specification. This viewpoint of quality is seen as inappropriate to the products of higher education as graduates are not all the same. Strydom *et al.* (1997:94) echo this sentiment when they argue that the way in which “perfection/consistency” conceptualises quality assumes a consistent process which produces a defect-free output and this is inconsistent with the “exploratory nature of higher education”.

Lučin (2005:215) suggests that the remaining four conceptions of quality, namely, excellence, fitness for purpose, value for money and transformation, if understood as a matrix, have the potential to form the basis of an analytical framework in terms of which to consider quality in higher education. In view of the fact that conceptions of quality shape the way in which an assessment of quality is conceptualised (Lučin, 2005:215), an understanding of these differing conceptions of quality has the potential to assist in an analysis of the priorities that various stakeholders bring to evaluating quality in higher education.

Nevertheless, a potential tension remains in the framework outlined above – a tension between conceptualisations of quality that highlight *accountability* and those conceptualisations that place *continuous improvement* as the purpose of quality assurance to the fore. Ratcliff (2003:120) suggests that the discourse constructs these positions as if in competition.

It is, thus, evident that quality in higher education is a multidimensional, multilevel and dynamic concept that relates to the contextual settings of an educational model, to the institutional mission and objectives, as well as to the specific standards within a given system, institution, programme, or discipline. It is, therefore, not possible to talk about quality as a single concept and any definition of quality must, thus, encompass the context in which the term is used (UNESCO, 2007:8).

The International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE, 2009:6) argues that, although all of these notions may be valid in some contexts, it is possible that not all of them may be applicable in all circumstances. For example, as regards higher education systems that reach out to include a varied population of students, with a wide range of qualifications and interests, "relevance" may be a more significant way of defining quality than "excellence", as excellence unavoidably carries with it an implication of selectivity and exclusion. On the other hand, excellence may be the best way of looking at a doctoral programme. Another example is the notion of quality as improvement. Improvement is certainly important, but it may, sometimes, start from an extremely low base so that, even if there were improvement, it may be difficult to identify this improvement with quality (INQAAHE, 2009:6).

UNESCO (in Vlăsceanu *et al.*, 2004:5) points out that there are advantages and disadvantages to each definition of the notion of quality and that each definition may be more or less suitable for a specific period of time and/or national context. In terms of the evolution of the term quality, there are permanent movements and oscillations between the relative versus absolute, internal versus absolute, internal versus externally oriented, and basic versus more advanced and sophisticated notions of quality. Common to all of these approaches, however, is the integration of the following elements:

- The guaranteed realisation of minimal standards and benchmarks

- The capacity to set objectives within diverse contexts and to realise these objectives with the given input and context variables
- The ability to satisfy the demands and expectations of both direct and indirect consumers and stakeholders
- The drive towards excellence (UNESCO in Vlăsceanu *et al.*, 2004:5)

As regards HEIs, a pragmatic way in which to define quality in a context of diversity is one that emphasises the capacity of the higher education institution to meet both external expectations and internal purposes and goals, thus organising its processes in a consistent way so as to realise the expected outcomes. Accordingly, quality is associated with external and internal consistency in the following ways (INQAAHE, 2009:25):

- **External consistency** – the institution organises its resources and processes in order to meet the standards and expectations defined by its significant reference group (discipline, profession, type of institution). This ensures that the outcomes of the institution are reliable and acceptable in terms of the standards of the discipline, the profession, or the institutional category.
- **Internal consistency** – emphasises the need to focus on the purposes and goals of the institution with the institution adjusting its actions to suit its own principles and priorities.

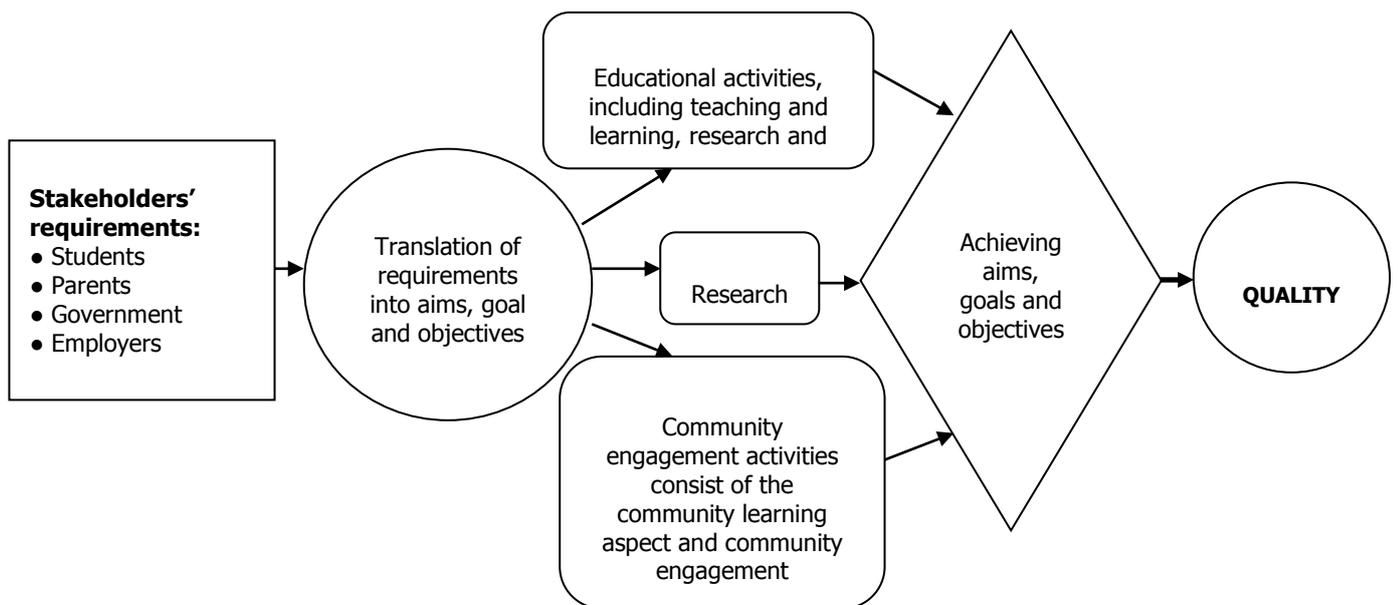
This way of defining quality makes it possible to apply the notion of quality to different types of institutions but, at the same time, it constitutes a sufficiently rigorous approach to the assessment of quality, since it makes it possible to identify both external and internal requirements, and translate these requirements into useful and applicable standards.

### **2.2.3 Perspectives on the notion of quality**

In the current debate there is a realisation that the concept of quality is both multidimensional and multilevel and that it is a concept encompassing different characteristics and consequences. Nevertheless, there is certain coherence about the core of the concept (Redder, 2010:26). There are three core aspects to the concept of quality, namely, goals, the process deployed in realising these goals, and the extent to which the goals are realised (Green, 1994:13). Quality is, thus, a relative concept, and the various interest groups or stakeholders in higher education may have different priorities, with these different priorities resulting in their foci of attention being different. This, in turn, results in different definitions and different focal points as regards the concept of quality (IUCEA, 2008c:6).

As has already been pointed out, absolute quality does not exist and, because each stakeholder in higher education has his/her own ideas and expectations, it may be argued that "quality is a matter of negotiating between the HEIs and the stakeholders" (IUCEA, 2008d:6). In this negotiation process, it is essential that each stakeholder formulate, as clearly as possible, his/her requirements and the HEIs must then try to reconcile these different wishes and requirements. The expectations may, sometimes, run parallel, but they may also end in conflict. As far as possible, the requirements of all stakeholders should be translated into both the mission and goals of an institution and into the objectives of the programmes of study as well as the research programme and community engagement programmes (*cf.* IUCEA, 2008d:6).

Thus, the challenge lies in attaining the goals and objectives. If these goals and objectives are, indeed, achieved, then it may be stated that the higher education institution has quality – see figure 2.2.



Source: IUCEA (2008b:6)

**Figure 2.2: Quality as an object of negotiation between the relevant parties**

As may be seen in figure 2.2, the stakeholders who are interested in quality assurance include:

- *Students* – the primary recipients of higher education. The quality of training they receive defines their potential performance in later life.
- *Parents* – often pay for the studies of their children and, consequently, they demand value for money education for them.
- *Governments* – demand accountability from their HEIs.
- *Employers* – demand well-trained graduates with competences which enable them to operate effectively in today's knowledge-based economic world of market.
- *Institutions* themselves – they are cognisant of the keen competitiveness of the global higher education system.
- *Society* – benefits or suffers from the effect of either good or poor quality higher education (IUCEA, 2008b:6).

Thus, the best that may be achieved is to define, as clearly as possible, the criteria that each stakeholder uses when judging quality, and to ensure that these competing views are taken into account when assessments of quality are undertaken (Green, 1994:17). It is, thus, possible to conclude, for the purpose of this study, that the value of quality is a given in terms of what the HEIs' understanding of the concept.

As has already been said, an absolute definition of quality does not exist. Accordingly, it is not possible for this study and, indeed, the study will make no attempt, to prescribe any single definition or approach to defining quality to which HEIs will be asked to adhere. However, in the interests of establishing a common understanding in the study, the following operational definition of quality was developed and adopted for the purposes of the study:

Quality in higher education refers to the character of a set of elements in the input, process, and output of the higher education system that provides services that completely satisfy both internal and external stakeholders by meeting their explicit and implicit expectations. Quality is, thus, the degree to which value is added to the total range of a student's experience of the higher education and services provided in order to meet the standards as perceived by all stakeholders.

This definition places both the meeting of standards and the satisfaction of all stakeholders at the centre of the higher education institution's quest for quality. In addition, it is believed that this definition encompasses all the different notions of quality as provided by the various scholars in the literature analysis which was conducted in the course of the study. However, as there is no definition of quality that is best in every situation, HEIs and interest groups are urged to examine both the strengths and the weaknesses of this definition before adapting it to their unique circumstances.

#### **2.2.4 Defining quality assurance**

The literature reveals that, as in the case of the concept of quality, different stakeholders define the concept of quality assurance in different ways (Redder, 2010:20). In other words, the various definitions offered of the term quality assurance encompass numerous different views and meanings, and yet these definitions are closely related. Several of these definitions of quality assurance will now be discussed in order to highlight both the differences and the similarities.

Quality assurance, in general, is defined as that particular aspect of the overall management function that determines and implements the quality policy (intentions and directions of the organisation). Either the government or funding agencies may impose quality assurance procedures on institutions, or else institutional or departmental management may set them up internally (Martin & Stella, 2007:34).

In the context of education, quality assurance comprises all planned and systematically carried out activities which are directly related to the maintenance of, and improvement in, the quality of education. As such, quality assurance covers all activities, procedures, rules of conduct, formal mechanisms or organisational arrangements which are designed to ensure quality (Redder, 2010:27).

According to Kis (2005:3), the term *quality assurance* refers to "systematic, structured and continuous attention to quality in terms of quality *maintenance* and *improvement*". Kis (2005:3) goes on to say that quality assurance is the means by which a higher education institution guarantees, with confidence and certainty, that the standards and quality of its educational provision are being maintained and enhanced.

Smout (2001:20) defines quality assurance as the process of monitoring quality for continuous improvement and argues that "to 'assure' is to make certain or ensure that something is happening". For example, if quality is defined as "fitness for purpose", then quality assurance would be defined as assessing the level of fitness for purpose. In simpler terms, quality assurance entails providing assurance that the institution concerned is keeping its promises to its customers in terms of the quality of the qualifications it confers in relation to the knowledge, understanding and work-related skills that the holders of its qualifications will possess. Harman (2000:1) is of the same opinion when he defines quality assurance in higher education as the systematic management and assessment procedures adopted by HEIs and systems in order to monitor performance against objectives, and to ensure the achievement of quality outputs and quality improvements. Harman asserts that quality assurance systems aim to provide appropriate evidence to substantiate the claims made about quality and, thus, to instil confidence in the key stakeholders as regards the management of quality and the level at which outcomes are achieved.

On the other hand, Harvey and Green (1993:41) define quality assurance as those mechanisms and procedures which are designed to reassure the various stakeholders in higher education that the institutions are according a high priority to implementing policies designed to maintain and enhance institutional effectiveness. In the same vein, Friend-Pereira *et al.* (2002:19) define quality assurance as the means by which an institution may guarantee, with confidence and certainty, that the standards and quality of its educational provision are being maintained and enhanced. The South African Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC, 2006:149) defines quality assurance as "processes of ensuring that specified standards or requirements have been achieved" while one of the international quality assurance experts, David Woodhouse (in HEQC, 2006:149), defines quality assurance as "those systems, procedures, processes and actions intended to lead to the achievement, maintenance, monitoring and achievement of quality".

According to Woodhouse, quality assurance is an on-going, internal activity which determines whether that which a higher education institution is aiming to achieve is, indeed, being achieved.

According to Harman (1998:331), quality assurance refers to systematic management procedures adopted to ensure the achievement of either a specified quality or improvements in quality and to enable key stakeholders to have confidence in the management of quality and the outcomes achieved. The key elements in this instance are the reviews or evaluations of departments, courses, disciplines and institutions while stakeholders are those individuals and groups with a major interest in the HEIs or systems and their achievements.

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) of Scotland describes quality assurance as “the means through which a higher education institution ensures and confirms that the conditions are in place for students to achieve the standards set by it or by another awarding body” (QAA, 2004:1).

According to Becket and Brookes (2005:25), quality assurance refers to the planned and systematic actions deemed necessary to provide adequate confidence that a product or service will satisfy given requirements for quality. Redder (2010:9) provides a similar definition when he defines quality assurance as a planned and systematic review process of an institution or programme to determine whether or not acceptable standards of education, scholarship, and infrastructure are being met, maintained and enhanced. Redder (2010:9) also maintains that a higher education institution is only as good as the quality of its teaching staff. The teaching staff is the heart of the institution and produces its graduates, its research products, and its service to the institution, community, and nation.

Vlăsceanu *et al.* (2007:74) provide a more inclusive definition when they refer to quality assurance as an “all-embracing term referring to an on-going, continuous process of evaluating

(assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining, and improving) the quality of a higher education system, institutions, or programmes". Vlăsceanu *et al.* (2007:74) further explain that quality assurance activities depend on the existence of the requisite institutional mechanisms, and are preferably sustained by a solid quality culture. Quality management, quality enhancement, quality control, and quality assessment are regarded as the means by which quality is ensured with the scope of quality assurance being determined by the shape and size of the higher education institution.

Materu (2007:60) defines quality assurance as the systematic management of procedures in order to monitor performance and to ensure the achievement of quality outputs and quality improvements. Materu (2007:61) goes on to state that quality assurance should serve a number of purposes. Apart from protecting stakeholder interests and facilitating the international recognition of the standards of the programmes and awards, quality assurance should be viewed as an important element as regards public accountability purposes, particularly in terms of satisfying taxpayers that the value for money in the government subsidies that are supporting education activities is being upheld, and that these educational activities are of an appropriate standard.

As a benchmark quality assurance is used to ensure that HEIs fulfil their responsibilities of being institutions which deliver quality education (Kanpinit, 2008:20). Kanpinit (2008:44) maintains that quality assurance is concerned with providing evidence to interested parties, both internal and external, that a higher education institution has procedures in place for ensuring that there is a commitment to improving quality. In so doing, it is essential that the results of the process of quality evaluation be established, monitored, and acted upon at all levels within the institution. The mechanisms that fulfil this function provide "quality control". According to Green (1994:45), quality control concerns itself with aims, objectives, the setting of standards, monitoring

assessment procedures, providing support structures that help to enhance quality, and reviewing all issues regarding quality.

Luckett (2005:45) asserts that quality assurance is different from quality control in the sense that quality assurance is a “before and during the event” process as regards preventing faults from arising in the first place, while quality control focuses on checking for compliance with specifications. In addition, quality assurance is about embedding quality in a process to ensure that the product is produced according to predetermined specifications (Jonathan, 2000:53). Quality assurance is, thus, a means of producing defect- and fault-free products and is about consistently meeting product/service specifications or “getting things right first time, every time”. This, in turn, means that the quality of the goods or services is assured by the fact that a system is in place. Such a system is known as a quality assurance system – a system that prescribes exactly how production or service delivery should take place and to what standards. Quality standards are maintained by following the procedures laid down in the quality assurance system. However, the latter argument may be more suited to the production of products in the manufacturing industry, than for higher education. It is, therefore, pertinent to note that HEIs should define quality assurance in terms of the education provided to suit their needs (Brennan & Shah, 2000:77).

According to Martin and Stella (2007:34), quality assurance may be divided into *internal* and *external* quality assurance. Internal quality assurance refers to the policies and mechanisms implemented in an institution or programme to ensure that the institution or programme is fulfilling its own purposes and meeting standards that apply to either higher education in general or to the profession or discipline in general. On the other hand, external quality assurance refers to the actions of an external body which assesses the operation of the institution or its programme in order to determine whether the institution or programme is meeting the agreed

standards (Martin & Stella, 2007:34). In many countries external quality assurance for HEIs and study programmes is termed *accreditation*. Accreditation is, thus, used to denote the recognition of individual institutions, faculties or fields of study as meeting standards and criteria and, therefore, being granted the right to provide (or introduce) a given type of programme. This process may imply initial and periodic self-study and also evaluation by external peers (Viăsceanu *et al.*, 2007:26).

### **2.2.5 Perspectives on the concept of quality assurance**

It is evident from the above discussions that the definition of quality assurance may vary from one country and institution to another (EUA, 2010:9). It also became clear that the basic definitions of quality assurance, as provided by several scholars, do not differ much within the context of higher education as all the dimensions were found to have something in common. Briefly, they all relate to quality assurance as planned, systematic, structured, continuous, and deliberate action or activities instigated and carried out with the intention and purpose of maintaining and improving the quality of higher education offerings. However, a single, common definition of quality assurance is still needed for the purposes of this study in order to provide uniformity and to avoid ambiguity. After having analysed the literature and taking into account the definitions of quality assurance as offered by various scholars, the following operational definition has been formulated for this study:

Quality assurance is the means by which HEIs assure themselves and guarantee to their customers and stakeholders alike that the conditions are in place for students to achieve the high educational standards as set at international, national, and institutional level. Quality assurance relates to all the policies, processes and actions through which the quality of higher education is measured, maintained and developed. Thus, quality

assurance is about defining, assuring, maintaining and improving the quality of higher education.

For the purposes of this study, quality assurance has been defined in the broad meaning of the term, including, in practice, all the elements of a strong quality culture in HEIs. Internal quality assurance in the context of this study should not be understood merely as either a specific quality monitoring process, for example, process descriptions, data collection and analysis, or an evaluation process, often carried out by a specific quality unit, but rather as including all activities related to defining, assuring and enhancing the quality of a higher education institution (EUA, 2010:18). In addition, the definition as cited above, was formulated because it appears to be comprehensive and includes important quality aspects such as maintaining and improving quality – the two primary purposes of quality assurance in higher education (Adams, 2008:19). Furthermore, the definition focuses on providing information and judgment on the basis of an agreed-upon and consistent process and well-established criteria. However, HEIs may still adopt their own internal quality assurance definitions to suit their unique needs and the circumstances in which they operate. While the definitions cited provide a general understanding of the concept, the distinction between quality assurance and other related terms such as quality management and quality control are still not clear.

Internal quality assurance is the main focus in this study and it defines all the activities of HEIs. Quality assurance is, thus, all about simply “getting and keeping” the quality of higher education on the agreed level. This level is not only set down by the institution itself, but it is also both a national and international level. Important key issues to be taken into account when striving for quality include goals reached, efficiency, organisational culture, structural processes and transparency (*cf.* Redder, 2010:27).

## 2.2.6 Principles of good practice in quality assurance

There are a number of principles guiding the practice of quality assurance in higher education. The Irish Higher Education Quality Network (IHEQN) identifies the following set of common, underpinning principles of good practice (IHEQN, 2005:1):

- The goal of quality assurance is *quality improvement* and includes the enhancement of the student experience. Quality assurance procedures should reflect this.
- The ownership and main responsibility of the quality assurance process resides with the higher education institution. This is an essential condition for promoting internal quality cultures within higher education and training institutions.
- All HEIs are responsible for the establishment of quality assurance procedures that are clear and transparent to all their stakeholders, including staff, students, external stakeholders and the general public, and which provide for the continuing evaluation of all academic and service departments and their activities.
- Quality assurance procedures conform to international best practice and include *self-evaluation*, followed by *external review* by persons who are competent to make national and international comparisons.
- Students, staff and other stakeholders must be involved in the quality assurance process.
- Quality assurance procedures include appropriate measures to protect the integrity of the overall quality assurance process.
- Quality assurance procedures ensure *public accountability* and *transparency* through the publication of the outcomes of the evaluations.
- The quality assurance process facilitates *continuous improvement* through the implementation of the findings of evaluations within the resources of the HEIs.
- Quality assurance procedures and their effectiveness are *reviewed* on a *cyclical basis* by independent experts and the outcomes of such reviews are published.

These principles may be helpful in setting the direction for HEIs that want to excel in quality assurance (IHEQN, 2005:1).

### **2.3 PURPOSE OF QUALITY ASSURANCE**

It is very important for higher education institutions to understand the purpose of quality assurance. Recent international studies refer to a wide range of broader purposes for quality assurance in higher education. These include:

- Improve HEIs and their programmes.
- Provide assurance to the public regarding the attainment of the required general level of quality.
- Provide assurance to the public and other stakeholders that a particular set of professional and academic standards is being achieved.
- Demonstrate effectiveness and provide accountability regarding whether or not institutional and programme intentions are being fulfilled to a satisfactory level.
- Determine or effect efficiency in all functions of the institution at all levels.
- Permit choices (programmes) to be made in the institutions in respect of funding from the government (Brennan & Shah, 2000b:70; Strydom, 2001:2; Lučin, 2005:10; Parri, 2006:108).

There also are two specific key purposes of quality assurance in higher education, namely *accountability* and *continuous improvement* (Strydom, 2001:3). However, attempts to achieve these two purposes differ from country to country and institution to institution because quality assurance is context bound. According to Strydom (2001:3), the purposes behind quality assurance will influence the characteristics of a quality assurance system. Quality assurance is about procedures, processes and actions intended to support the selected reasons and purposes through evaluating, monitoring and enhancing quality.

In the following sections these two specific key purposes, namely, accountability and improvement, will be discussed in more detail.

### **2.3.1 Accountability**

When a higher education system has managed to ensure a basic level of quality, either as the result of a strong licensing scheme, or other measures, it is still incumbent on the institution to inform its stakeholders about the quality of its offerings. In addition, the institution also needs to be accountable for the resources it uses, which it receives either from the government, which provides public funds, from students, who pay fees, or from other social sources (Ali & Shastri, 2010:12).

In such a situation, the main objective of quality assurance is to provide the stakeholders with sound, reliable information about the degree to which a higher education institution is actually fulfilling the promises it has made. At the same time, the institution must provide some evidence that its graduates are fulfilling the expectations of their disciplinary or professional reference groups (Charmers, 2008:8).

According to Parri (2006:109), *accreditation* systems assess an institution or programme in terms of their own purposes and a set of standards, and then provide public assurance of their quality, defining quality as the ability to meet both purposes and standards. By adding the definition of standards to the institution or programme's own purposes, such a quality assurance arrangement guides the institution towards what is considered a desired state. Parri (2006:110) also argues that assessment, and its criteria, become "the tail that wags the dog" and help move the system and its component institutions in the direction which the quality assurance agency considers necessary.

Ali and Shastri (2010:12) argue that accreditation may be the best option in higher education systems that are reasonably consolidated, but which are characterised by a significant range of diversity, either in terms of the type of institution or programme, the student population, or the level of qualifications offered. They reiterate that accreditation may be a powerful tool with which to promote the mobility of students, graduates and academic staff, between the HEIs in a specific country as well as abroad.

### **2.3.2 Quality evaluation cycle**

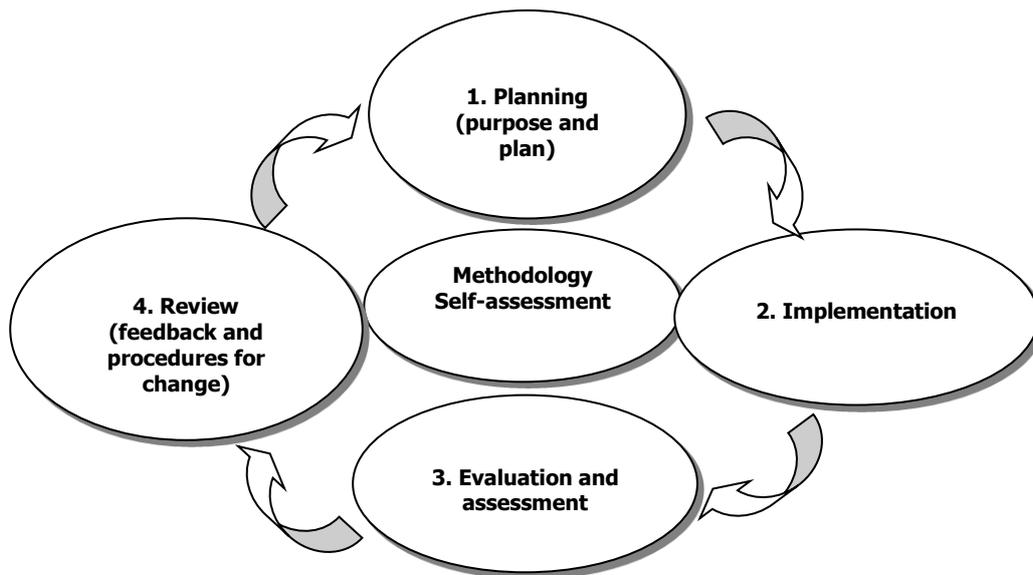
The literature identifies *quality evaluation cycle* as the desirable stage of quality assurance that brings about continuous quality improvement (Ali & Shastri, 2010:13). According to Ali and Shastri (2010:12), most higher education systems maintain that their goal is to promote quality, despite the fact that doing so necessitates several prior steps. Quality improvement recognises that the responsibility for quality lies with the HEIs; in addition, it focuses on the ability of a higher education institution to develop and apply effective policies and mechanisms both for self regulation and for the continuing advance towards quality (Kristensen, 2008:24).

According to Ali and Shastri (2010:13), the audit is the quality assurance process that is directly linked to quality improvement. As regards such an audit, the evaluation focuses on the institutional objectives, the way in which an institution is able to determine whether it is realising these objectives, and the ability of the institution to make the necessary adjustments to improve its performance should it detect weak areas of operation.

Visscher (2009:34) points out that the development of quality assurance systems in higher education is more and more strongly influenced by the principle of continuous improvement which is based on a model known as the Deming Quality Cycle (Visscher, 2009:34). According to

Visscher (2009), the Deming Quality Cycle was developed by W. Edwards Deming in 1982 and it comprises the following four phases, namely, Plan, Do, Check and Act (PDCA). The PDCA model of Deming was initially targeted at continuous quality improvement cycles in both business and manufacturing companies. The model was later adapted to higher education and was then revised to render it compatible with the services industry such as the higher education sector. This revised version of the Deming Quality Cycle reads as follows: Planning, Implementation, Evaluation and Assessment, and Review (Brennan & Shah, 2000a:70). Both versions of the model are, however, extremely similar in that goals are set and every attempt possible made to attain these goals. In addition, according to Visscher (2009: 35), "the first three phases are only of value if phase four is thereafter carried out successfully". Nevertheless, despite the fact that the model guides HEIs to pay attention to aspects that are important in terms of quality, it does not provide any answers about the way in which institutions should operate.

According to the Finnish National Board of Education (2008:8), the model may be applied as a quality management framework for both national quality assurance systems and for individual HEIs. The involvement of stakeholders is of the utmost importance when the aim is to improve the quality of both systems and operations. The phases of quality assurance used in the model are depicted in figure 2.3.



Source: Adapted from Finnish National Board of Education (2008:8)

### Figure 2.3: The quality improvement model

As illustrated in figure 2.3, the four phases of the model are planning, implementation, evaluation and assessment and review (feedback and procedures for change) with each of these phases being assigned a set of quality criteria. The various quality assurance systems in HEIs may make different choices of the relevant criteria when dealing with quality assurance and improvement in these institutions (Woodhouse, 2003:17). This is the reason why the model presents the core quality criteria in such a way that they may be applied to different operating environments as follows:

- **Planning** refers to the setting up of clear, appropriate and measurable goals and objectives in terms of policies, procedures, tasks and resources. In addition, this phase involves defining indicators to facilitate monitoring the attainment of these goals and objectives.
- The essential aspect of **implementation** is the establishment of procedures to ensure the attainment of the goals and objectives. These procedures may vary considerably at an

institutional level, for example, in terms of the development of the operational system and the organisational structure, resource collection, involvement of stakeholders, or development of partnerships.

- **Evaluation and assessment** encompass the evaluation of the higher education provided and the assessment of the achievement of outcomes at both system and individual levels. In general, the evaluation and assessment phase comprises two parts – firstly, the collection and processing of data and discussions and, secondly, the evaluation mechanism. This second part involves defining the scope of the evaluation as well as providing information on the results of the evaluation.
- **Review (feedback and procedures for change)** forms part of a systematic and goal-oriented process which is used to amend plans and to develop operations in order to achieve the targeted outcomes and set new objectives. The aim of this review phase is to learn from the information acquired, such as discussing and analysing the results with key stakeholders. It is also possible to learn from good practices by benchmarking the user's own operations in terms of these good practices.

The **methodology** may differ. The key issue for HEIs is to decide the type of methodology that will best serve their needs. Quality assurance and management emphasise self-assessment combined with external evaluation. Self-assessment is regarded as the main process in quality assurance and is a process in terms which HEIs evaluate their performance based on evidence and then produce the self-assessment reports. The purpose of self-assessment is the improvement of the entire higher education provided. Other key aspects of self-assessment include how and in what roles customers and stakeholders, for example, employers, students, and other authorities, participate in evaluation and the way in which they are motivated to take

responsibility for the evaluation. It is also important to determine the methods to be used to collect and analyse the data and to draw conclusions (Finnish National Board of Education, 2008:9).

According to the Finnish National Board of Education (2008:9), the quality improvement model, which is based on the Deming Quality Cycle, is in line with other contemporary quality assurance and assessment methods. In addition, it is possible to make use of other existing methods during the different phases of the Deming Quality Cycle. Interaction is the basic principle of this model. Repeating the cycle may bring the HEIs close to perfect operation and output and, thus, enable them to close the quality loop. In describing how the quality cycle operates, Deming writes: "Every next cycle must be better quality. As long as the circle is rolling, the quality is improving. Once the circle is interrupted, the quality fails" (Deming, 1986:3).

The uninterrupted rotation of the circles would enable HEIs to close the quality loop (*cf.* Brennan & Shah, 2000a:70).

## **2.4 TYPES OF QUALITY ASSURANCE**

Redder (2010:33) identifies two areas in which quality assurance may be distinguished, namely, *internal quality assurance* and *external quality assurance*. According to Ameen (2007:17), internal quality assurance entails everything that a higher education institution does internally, without external influence, in order to ensure a high level of quality. On the other hand, external quality assurance refers to the actions of an external body which assesses the operations of the institution or its programmes in order to determine whether the institution or its programmes are meeting the agreed upon standards. The system of external quality assurance has four main functions, namely; quality improvement, external accountability, transparency for the market and

regulation of the higher education system (Rizk & Al-Alusi, 2009:17). There is a fine line dividing the activities that pertain to internal quality assurance only and the activities pertaining to external quality assurance only and, in fact, the aspects of internal quality assurance are intertwined with aspects of external quality assurance. Internal quality assurance may be considered as one of the aspects within the external quality assurance framework and *vice versa* (Redder, 2010:33).

#### **2.4.1 Internal quality assurance**

As mentioned earlier, internal quality assurance encompasses all the activities that HEIs must carry out internally in order to maintain and improve their quality. In other words, internal quality assurance refers to the internal policies and mechanisms of a higher education institution for ensuring that it is fulfilling its purposes as well as meeting the standards that apply to higher education in general or to the profession or discipline (Redder, 2010:33).

According to Harvey (2009:1), internal quality assurance is as old as higher education itself. Traditionally, from inception, HEIs design and implement various internal activities to ensure that certain agreed upon standards of performance are being met. One such mechanism is the *external examination system*. This system involves the assessment of student examinations for compliance with both curriculum content and general professional or global standards. In well established institutions, the external examiner may be from another department within the institution but, in most cases, the external examiner is appointed from another institution. The external examiner must be a senior academic staff member, usually of the status of professor and is appointed by the academic senate of the institution on the recommendation of the vice-chancellor on the advice of the dean of the department concerned and the relevant dean of faculty.

According to Vaira (2007:136), “there is also a practice, further in the traditional system of quality assurance, in which a professor or a senior academic colleague will sit in a class to listen to a young lecturer and, subsequently, advise the young lecturer on style and demeanour in the classroom”. This may also involve the professor designing, conducting and reporting research together with the young academic with the aim of improving the capacity of the young academic to conduct and report research. This practice is referred to as *mentoring*. Mentoring may be at either the individual or the institutional level. At the individual level, the young academic staff member or a newly appointed vice-chancellor may opt to be mentored by a senior academic staff member or vice-chancellor, who will then serve as a role model to the staff member being mentored. At the institutional level, a new higher education institution may choose to be mentored by an older and more experienced institution in the development and operation of its structures. This practice is highly recommended for all new HEIs so as to ensure they develop the form and essence of university culture and practice (Kettunen, 2009:3).

*Student-lecturer assessment* is another mechanism of traditional internal quality assurance in terms of which students assess their course lecturers. While this practice is often not popular among lecturers, it has been used in many HEIs to allow the students a say in the quality of curriculum delivery and to limit truancy and possible unrestrained behaviour on the part of the lecturers. The quality of the students in a programme is an important basic determinant of programme or institutional quality (Webb, 2000:34).

As was mentioned earlier in chapter 1, these traditional mechanisms for quality assurance worked in the days when higher education was for the élite and a few students only were able move up through the education system to the level of higher education (Brennan & Shah, 2000a:70). However, recent changes in the higher education landscape which were influenced by factors such as massification, globalisation, internationalisation, the emergence of and the use of new

technology in the delivery of higher education, the introduction of different modes of study such as distance education, and the increasing demand for good quality higher education by stakeholders have triggered the emergence of modern mechanisms for internal quality assurance to complement the traditional mechanisms as the latter were found to be no longer sufficient to meet the contemporary demands and challenges posed to higher education (Jonathan, 2000:35). Modern mechanisms for internal quality assurance that are widely discussed in the literature include

- self-assessment (followed by external assessment or peer review for validation)
- benchmarking
- stakeholder feedback (Goh, 2000:153; Webb, 2000:27; Ullah, 2005:33; NAAC, 2007:31; Mishra, 2007:31; COL, 2010:1).

According to Gallagher (2010:2), these approaches are generally used in combination in order to provide a comprehensive set of data about the quality of higher education provided, and how successfully the quality assurance system is implemented.

The above mentioned approaches warrant a brief discussion to establish the way in which the various HEIs may implement them in an efficient and effective way.

#### **2.4.2 Self-assessment**

According to Adams (2008:3), self-assessment may play a critical role not only for those institutions committed to learning and improvement, but it may also underpin the capacity of an institution to meet external quality assurance requirements. When self-assessments are conducted effectively, they may result in an enhanced and shared understanding of performance

as against set objectives, the formulation of improved institutional practices and outcomes, and better founded responses to changes and future directions.

While it is commonly acknowledged that there is no one model of self-assessment nor an appropriate frequency at which they should take place, there are, nevertheless, some general principles as regards the way in which to design and conduct effective self-assessments (Watson & Maddison, 2005:20). This section considers some of these principles as well as possible pitfalls and challenges as drawn from the literature review. Furthermore, the section provides an overview of the main stages involved in conducting an effective self-assessment.

Self-assessment (which may also be referred to as *self-review*, *self-evaluation*, *self-study*, or *self-reflection*) may be defined as “the process of critically reviewing the quality of one’s own performance and provision” (Harvey, 2004:8; INQAAHE, 2009:14).

Watson and Maddison (2005:6) define self-assessment in the context of HEIs as:

... collective, reflective practice carried out by a higher education institution with the intention of understanding better and improving its own progress towards its objectives, enhancing its institutional effectiveness, and both responding to and influencing positively the context in which it is operating ... it is directly undertaken to influence action.

It has been argued that self-assessment is integral to the management of change and to improving the learning capacity of organisations and, thus, enabling them to respond to change more effectively (Watson & Maddison, 2005:7).

According to Schmitz and Whitworth (2002:134), “the key to needed educational improvement lies in systematic, multi-methodological, and sustained self-assessment at institutional,

departmental or programme level". In essence, self-assessment provides an opportunity to "reality test" the performance of an institution and to identify opportunities for improving and/or sustaining desired practices, processes and outcomes (Adams, 2008:4).

The European University Association (2010:7) offers four important basic questions that self-assessment should consider, namely:

- What is the institution trying to do? Mission, aims and objectives and their appropriateness as well as how the institution perceives itself locally, nationally and internationally.
- How is the institution trying to implement self-assessment? Processes, procedures and practices in place and an analysis of their effectiveness.
- How does the institution know self-assessment works? Feedback systems in place, in particular, quality assurance mechanisms, quality control or quality monitoring, and quality management.
- In what way does the institution change in order to improve? Strategic planning and the capacity and willingness to change.

According to the EUA (2010:7), these four questions do not simply provide a structure for writing the self-assessment report – an essential aspect of assessment – but they also constitute guidelines for the coherent reorganisation and restructuring of the institution, for analysing its strengths and weaknesses, its opportunities and threats and, lastly, for determining the institutional capacity to change. Self-assessment may be undertaken either as a discrete exercise or it may form the basis of information which is then validated by means of a broader audit/review process (*cf.* Mishra, 2007:17).

### **2.4.2.1 Rationale for self-assessment**

According to Adams (2008:4), there is a range of reasons for undertaking a self-assessment process. External events that may trigger the need for a self-assessment include accreditation/certification; compliance audits (e.g. against relevant legislation); quality audits; or reporting requirements (e.g. to government departments) in which a self-assessment report forms the basis of review and validation. Other reasons for undertaking a self-assessment may include an institutional commitment to ongoing review cycles; strategic planning; or a perceived need to change (e.g. redesigning a function, resource allocation). The purpose of a self-assessment will determine whether it is an "event" or part of ongoing practice to support an institution's quality assurance and improvement processes (Adams, 2008:4).

Primarily, self-assessments are conducted in order to ascertain improvements and efficiencies in support of organisational objectives which have been identified and to validate strengths based on a formalised analysis. They also often provide information not known to everyone and support a collective understanding of current (and desired) practices and outcomes. Kells (1995:30) states that the chief benefits to any institution of undertaking a self-assessment include the meaningful participation of staff members in clarifying and solving problems, the enhancement of institutional openness, and improving overall institutional effectiveness.

Letuka (2000:16) and Adams (2008:5) identify the following, more specific outcomes of self-assessment:

- Verifying that processes are in place, and whether these processes are operating effectively.
- Determining whether existing policies and procedures are effective in meeting institutional goals, and identifying any gaps.

- Providing information that may not normally be evident, for example, localised innovative practices in teaching and learning.
- Enhancing the understanding of staff members, student and/or other stakeholders of organisational processes and outcomes.
- "Reality testing" achievements as compared to strategic goals.
- Increasing the engagement with change.
- Disclosing weaknesses and forcing confrontation.
- Promoting honest communication.
- Encouraging benchmarking, either internally and/or externally.
- Providing a base for on-going comparison and benchmarking.
- Identifying activities that are misaligned with organisational goals/objectives.
- Providing evidence of the quality processes in place.
- Promoting the empowerment and engagement of participants in self-assessment.
- Promoting an evidence-based culture.
- Promoting learning.
- Enabling the self-identification of improvement gaps and the development of associated strategies to address these gaps prior to an external audit.
- Improving the institution's mission, programme content, policies, procedures, services, organisational and intellectual environment and performance of the programme or institution under investigation.
- Fostering commitment by enacting the recommended improvements through participation in the self-assessment process.
- Enhancing the capacity of the programme or institution in question as regards continued self-assessment;
- Providing a basis for informed decision-making (planning) about the future of the programme or institution under investigation;

- Yielding written materials that may be used as the basis of external peer reviews or audits by quality assurance agencies or professional bodies (Letuka, 2000:16; Adams, 2008:5).

#### **2.4.2.2 Scope of self-assessment**

Adams (2008:5) asserts that the scope of a self-assessment may range from whole-of-institution, to whole-of-faculty/division, to whole-of-school/department, to individual committees, programme/courses, or to unit/topic level. There is no one unit of analysis for self-assessments, and the appropriate frequency and depth of the self-assessment processes will be unique to each institution. Depending on the purpose, a self-assessment process may be oriented as either formative, supportive and for improvement; or summative, evaluative and for assessment (Adams, 2008:5).

Watson and Maddison (2005:73) offer a taxonomy for considering any method of evaluation that relates method to purpose:

- Fitness for purpose or measurement against a standard
- Summative or formative evaluation
- Accountability or self-learning
- Quality control or assurance
- Criterion or norm referencing
- Customer satisfaction or producer norms.

It is very important to consider these aspects when determining the scope of self-assessment. However, irrespective of the scope, a continuous improvement focus should inform the design of the process.

The review may be restricted to an exercise in data gathering and self-description, resulting in a snapshot of the current state of the subject. While this has its value, it usually fails to generate the institutional improvement that can come from a critical self-analysis of strengths and weaknesses. A review that is structured as an analytical self-evaluation is likely to reveal possibilities for enhancing the strengths and remedying the weaknesses, regardless of the core purpose of the review. If the review is for external purposes, the consequent improvement strengthens the institution's case vis-à-vis the external audit, assessment or accreditation (Woodhouse, 1998:23).

#### **2.4.2.3 Approaches to self-assessment**

While there is no one model for self-assessment, King (1998:34); Jennings (2007:20) and Adams (2008:7) identify four main approaches to conducting self-assessment exercises, while Frye, McKinney, and Trimble (2006:101) provide comments on some of the advantages and disadvantages of each approach. These approaches include:

- ***Surveys approach*** – mail, telephone surveys, internal questionnaires, and random samples. Surveys may be relatively inexpensive, are usually (but not always) easy to administer and may reach participants over a wide area. Surveys may provide quantitative and qualitative data that is relatively easy to analyse and which may be tabulated to reflect currency of opinions. Although achieving adequate response rates may be problematic future online surveys may offer improved response rates. Other disadvantages include possible evasive answers, central tendencies in scoring, and difficulties in the interpretation of responses.
- ***Guided workshops approach*** – semi-structured discussion sessions guided by criteria and/or key questions. Examples include focus groups with staff/students, or individual interviews. While these may be resource and time intensive, they may provide a rich source of evidence through the exploration of issues in depth and, thus, they may reveal new

insights. The success of this approach depends, ultimately, on the skills of the facilitator(s) in ensuring that there is active listening, objectivity in judgments and a range of viewpoints is sought. External facilitation is one way in which to manage respondent perceptions of a lack of privacy and anonymity. While focus groups allow in-depth discussion, it may be difficult to prioritise issues and engender sufficient trust to allow an open group discussion on sensitive issues.

- **Assessment teams approach** – information summarising and analysing the area/course/issue under review is carried out by a team of assessors. The team members may all be internal or they may include external expertise relevant to the scope of the review. If there is more than one reviewer, there may not be adequate consistency in collecting and analysing the data.
- **Structured learning approach** – analysis of existing evidence/documentation and reflection on results, either in a group or individually. An example would be reflection by senior management on trend data related to organisational key performance indicators and targets.

Self-assessment processes may draw on more than one of these approaches. However, the approach adopted will depend, not only on the purpose and scope of the self-assessment, but also, to a large extent, on the timeframes, culture of the organisation, and resources available (Jennings, 2007:20; Adams, 2008:7).

#### **2.4.2.4 Challenges and pitfalls of self-assessments**

It is clear from the literature that there are a number of challenges and potential pitfalls as regards conducting self-assessments (Ball & Wilkinson, 1994:18; Anderson, 2006:72; Adams, 2008:8). It is very important for higher education institutions to be aware of these challenges and pitfalls in order to put them into consideration when conducting self-assessments. These challenges and pitfalls include the following:

- An unclear purpose as regards the self-review or unclear communication about the purpose of the review
- Putting a public relations "spin" on the outcomes reported, thus losing opportunities to identify improvements
- Creating perceptions of a bureaucratic process. This may sometimes result in a "tick and flick" exercise rather than a deeper and pervasive process which encourages critical reflection and assessment
- Perception of assessment "fatigue", which may make engagement difficult
- Duplicated processes
- Information overload
- Misinterpretation of outcomes, or outcomes (recommendations) that are either impossible to implement or are too numerous/trivial
- Potential for outcomes to be used punitively and also perception that this may be the case
- Inability to identify good evidence/information as a basis for the self-assessment
- Disconnected staff/areas, for example, different values/objectives, preference for different processes, and seeking different outcomes
- Non-alignment to individual staff outcomes
- Reliance on individual(s) to conduct process, for example, a head of department undertaking the entire self-assessment and not engaging other staff members in the process
- Over-reliance on individuals to implement the outcomes
- Resistance to change

If conducted well and if the self-assessments encompass an inclusive process in which there is participation on the part of range of stakeholders – staff, students, and industry/community – self-assessments are, inevitably, a resource-intensive processes. This is particularly true in the



**Stage 1: Designing the self-assessment process:** Watson and Maddison (2005:20) highlight a number of desirable features in a self-assessment process:

- It is a habitual aspect of institutional management.
- Ownership is defined through both the executive and academic functions of the institution.
- There is focus on reflection and learning, and using sensible tools and approaches in an intelligent manner.
- It is a bottom up activity, and truly collective, engaging both staff and students.
- There is clear definition of roles and responsibilities relating to the process.
- Its focus is aligned to institutional goals and culture.
- Its primary goal is understanding and enhancing student learning and the quality of the student experience.
- It is kept in proportion, taking account of other institutional activities and priorities.
- Its momentum is sustained.

Harvey (2002:14) considers that "the less threatening the evaluation process, the more open, honestly reflective and useful is the self-evaluation process". Against this background, Adams (2008:10) suggests the following factors that should be taken into account when designing a self-assessment process:

- Ensure consensus on the need to conduct a self-assessment - be clear *why* a self-assessment is being undertaken, its emphasis (What are the key issues?) and the expected outcomes and benefits to be derived from staff/stakeholder time and resources.
- Clear terms of reference and process guidelines communicated effectively are critical elements to any self-assessment process. Adams (2008:10) suggests that it is useful to conduct briefing sessions well in advance of the self-assessment processes, involving, wherever possible, staff members who have undertaken the process previously. This will offer those

staff members with the opportunity to provide their perspectives and to share experiences, outcomes and benefits (as well as providing a reality check on the timeframe and resources required).

- Secure executive and management “buy-in” is essential in order to help shape the internal motivation for the process; provide support (resources, etc.); give priority to the review; and provide leadership for any resulting changes. This is considered to be the most critical element in ensuring a successful self-assessment process.
- Be cautious about the frequency of self-assessment so as to avoid “ritual” assessments that may lead to a culture of assessment fatigue. Build cyclical self-assessment into existing processes where possible. For example, an agenda item for the final meeting of a committee each year may be a brief questionnaire and/or facilitated discussion on performance as against terms of reference and/or work plans.
- Ensure appropriate resources are in place, including appropriately skilled staff, budget and information. Consider resources for providing incentives for participation in and implementation of improvements identified through the process, for example, by linking self-assessment improvements to performance planning and recognition, publication of improvements aligned to key performance indicators, or showcasing process improvements throughout the institution, for example, by means of workshops, ceremonies or acknowledgement by senior executive in staff newsletters or similar means of communication.
- Plan the process, including clear responsibilities and tasks for coordination, data collection methods, and the establishment of realistic timeframes in terms of which to conduct the review. Ensure that there is one person who is responsible for coordination and oversight, rather than delegating all aspects to different people. Ensure clarity of tasks and responsibilities of those involved in conducting the self-assessment.
- Provide adequate training/information to participants and coordinator(s) to ensure that the process is conducted professionally and efficiently.

- Ensure that the self-assessment is evidence-based, drawing on existing data and information wherever possible. For example, as regards assessments involving teaching and learning, student information, and/or benchmarking outcomes using the good teaching scale of the course experience questionnaire comprise basic data that should be used.
- Ensure that all relevant stakeholders are given the opportunity for meaningful participation throughout the process. Kells (1995:18) notes the importance of participative self-assessment processes in order to “allow those with the responsibility to implement changes to discover the need for those changes and to formulate them”. Those self-assessment processes which have involved just one or two people (normally the manager) producing a document that outlines their perspectives on the performance and operations of an area/course/programme have had limited impact in engaging staff to identify with, and support, improvement initiatives.
- Consider other competing priorities and previous experiences that may shape expectations and possible staff commitment, and which may negatively influence self-assessment outcomes. Examples include undertaking concurrent professional accreditation processes, new course developments, introduction of new systems, and structural changes.
- Ensure that the process is based on honest and candid evaluation. The level of honesty and openness of the participants is likely to be shaped by the purpose of the review and the organisational culture, as well as leadership commitment for the process, and confidence that the outcomes will not be used punitively. Where possible, briefing sessions involving staff from other areas who have had previous experience in the self-assessment process may provide a level of comfort as regards the purpose and outcomes of the review. Communication that reinforces a focus on findings relating to the performance of processes and systems, not individual performance, may also be beneficial.
- Ensure that there is adequate time for reflection on, and input into, the exercise as well as analysis of findings.

- Be clear about the way in which the self-assessment findings will be reported, what will happen with the findings and outcomes, how (and to whom) they will be communicated, and who will be responsible for implementing and for monitoring their completion. Particularly in cases in which self-assessments are cyclical, it is useful to develop detailed guidelines that include this information for the process.
- Identify the impact on students and other stakeholders of conducting the self-assessment (both during and after the process). For example, plan for students to provide input at non-critical times of the semester, when they may have more time in which to participate. Conversely, do not schedule student feedback for times when the students are away from campus on full-time industry experience or vacation. Likewise, do not schedule assessment activities involving academic staff in peak times of the semester, such as during examination marking.
- Develop clear communication mechanisms. For example, to those involved in or affected by the process (before, during and after) provide clear information about why and how the process will be conducted, by whom, when, and the expectations arising from their involvement. Provide adequate explanations of the purpose and rationale for the self-assessment, and how the findings will be used. As regards other relevant parties, it is important to ensure that they are kept updated on the progress of the self-assessment.

**Stage 2: Allocate resources:** The scope and purpose of the self-assessment will guide resource allocation – financial, human, physical and information. Adams (2008:13) advises that institutions should consider the following activities, although not all of which will be applicable to every assessment process.

- Design of self-assessment process
- Coordination of process (e.g. steering group/project manager)

- Design and development of self-assessment tools, for example, surveys, questionnaires, and structured workshops
- Data collection, collation and presentation
- Administration of self-assessment tools, for example, through the facilitation of focus groups or workshops, use of existing committees, seeking written submissions, and using survey instruments
- Analysis of results and information, including recording outcomes of workshops, if applicable
- Writing up reports and/or preparing for and making presentations, including appropriate consultation on developments
- Preparation for report publication, for example, printing costs
- Seeking necessary resources to address main findings
- Cost for external validation through audit or peer review, for example, audit fees, consultancy costs, and travel and accommodation expenses of external participants
- Consideration of the opportunity cost of participation by key stakeholders, for example, students, staff, and external community members (Adams, 2008:13)

***Stage 3: Identify and collate information:*** This may constitute a difficult stage of the process. Educational processes are frequently hard to measure and the effects upon students are often intangible and delayed (Schmitz & Whitworth, 2002:135).

However, according to Schmitz and Whitworth (2002:135), clear information, including performance measures and outcomes on which to base judgments, is fundamental in ensuring a successful self-assessment. Information whether facts or opinions should generally reflect both processes and outcomes and, depending on the scope of the review, may encompass both institution-wide and local (operational) activities. External (benchmarking) information may provide comparative evidence of performance relative to other organisations, evidence of

performance over time, facilitate an objective assessment of strengths and weaknesses, and provide ideas which will stimulate further thought.

According to Goh (2000:153), information gathering may involve conducting individual or group interviews, observing systems and procedures, or reviewing data in order to find examples of actions and practices that either meet or do not meet assessment criteria or desired outcomes.

Kells (1995:25) notes three general approaches to the use of measures. These may be used in combination depending on the purpose of the self-assessment:

- Use of "measures of the achievement of stated intentions" (goals, objectives, etc.). For example, progress toward a goal to increase research productivity may be measured by information including the number of research publications, and amount of competitive grant incomes.
- Use of "measures of the adequacy of functioning of the processes", for example, level of participation in and satisfaction with training and professional development activities.
- Use of measures to demonstrate "the extent of compliance "with standards/other expectations (Kells, 1995:25).

Ideally, the self-assessment process should not create further documentation but, rather, it should gather and analyse existing evidence that will encourage informed dialogue and the assessment of performance. Webb (2000:27) and Adams (2008:17) advise that institutions should consider the way in which existing documentation and other information, including benchmarking, from previous assessments, for example, external accreditation/reporting/audit requirements, which is relevant to the general or specific focus of the self-assessment may be used and cited in order to minimise the creation of additional documentation. It may, however,

still be necessary to conduct new research (including gathering opinions through such mechanisms as staff/student focus groups) during the self-assessment process in order to supplement existing data.

According to INQAAHE (2009:16), existing documentation/information to inform self-assessments in a higher education institution may include, but is not limited to:

- Reports, for example, annual reports, previous reviews, audits, and government data
- Strategic, business and operational plans
- Policies, procedures and guidelines
- Stakeholder feedback outcomes, for example, summary reports
- Committee minutes/agendas
- Organisational charts
- Handbooks
- Staff lists and qualifications
- Course/programme guides
- Programme/course approval and review documentation
- Samples of assessment results
- Benchmarking outcomes
- Staffing plans
- Statistical trend data against key performance indicators.

Performance data for self-assessments covering activities across schools/departments may, typically, include trends and information relating to the following (Adams, 2008:17):

- Student satisfaction outcomes –tqualitative and quantitative
- Graduate outcomes

- Student preferences
- Student progress rates
- Target/actual student load
- International offshore programme completions
- Research completions by programme
- Weighted publications
- Research income
- External grant success rates and income
- Student/staff ratios
- Staff profile, including numbers, ages, gender, and levels
- Staff qualifications
- Staff turnover rates

**Stage 4: Develop self-assessment tool(s):** According to Mishra (2007:31), assessment tools (whether administered as a survey or used as the basis for structured workshops/discussions) guide the self-assessment process and may assist in the formulation of prompting questions for consideration against the items/areas being assessed. Questions are formulated in such a way so as to elicit strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities by focusing on the processes and outcomes related to the items/areas. It is important to ensure that all areas of enquiry, for example, standards/criteria and processes, are covered, and to provide a starting point for analysis and reporting. In addition, it is essential that, questions be relevant to the institution's objectives, and framed in such language so that they are meaningful and engaging to the participants. The questions should stimulate thinking about important issues, and should require evaluation and judgment – as opposed to purely descriptive responses. Questions that elicit either a yes/no answer or for which there are obvious answers should, generally, be avoided. A balance between

future orientation and past achievements is also necessary. Assessment tools may also contain examples of evidence to consider in reflecting on the questions (Adams, 2008:18).

The collection of some trend/background data (such as the information noted above), prior to development of the assessment tool, may inform the development of relevant questions that will facilitate an informed dialogue and function as an effective assessment tool (NAAC, 2007:31).

Adams (2008:20) maintains that external quality frameworks may provide guidance in developing the self-assessment tools by outlining the key elements/criteria relevant to the processes or “themes” (such as research) under review.

**Stage 5: Undertake self-assessment:** Depending on the approach selected, assessment in terms of the questions and data presented may take place via mechanisms such as surveys/questionnaires; interviews; workshops; focus groups; or existing meetings/forums. Alternatively, various working groups with the relevant expertise may be convened to consider specific issues/items within the self-assessment. It is important to consider current activities and outcomes against those that are desired - whether the latter are planned institutional objectives/targets, alignment with policy provisions, external reference points (such as accreditation standards/criteria, or legislation) or identified good practice in other institutions. Ideally, as discussed above, this information should be included in an assessment tool (Adams, 2008:21).

**Stage 6: Analyse results:** According to Goh (2000:154), the results may be analysed in various ways, with the analysis being contingent on whether the assessment was undertaken using qualitative or quantitative means (or both). It is, however, essential that the analysis focus on identifying the key strengths and opportunities for improvement.

It may be beneficial to use a rating scale or scoring guide for those self-assessments which are conducted over a number of areas, or across the entire institution and/or where large amounts of data and records of assessment workshops/meetings need to be analysed in order to distil major trends, for example, to develop a performance portfolio for an external audit. In addition, it is essential that care be exercised in managing variations in scoring and to ensure that the results are not used for punitive purposes (Goh, 2000:155; Adams, 2008:22).

***Stage 7: Develop a self-assessment report:*** Adams (2008:22) argues that there is no one model for a self-assessment report. The goal of a self-assessment process should be a report that fairly and honestly portrays the institution, area or programme reviewed, avoids personal agendas, and elicits broad support amongst the institutional stakeholders. In order to achieve this, the report content should, ideally, be informed by broad input from affected stakeholders, be analytical, contain judgments with associated rationale, and be forward-looking. This is as opposed to a report that is merely descriptive, overly obsequious (or a public relations document), contains assertions without evidence, or is defensive. However, that is not to say that reports need always be in a formal written form. The outcomes of brief self-assessment processes may be best served by a presentation to the school/department/area concerned on the major results in order to prompt further discussion and the formulation of action as regards the items covered (Ullah, 2005:33).

Adams (2008:23) points out that the first, and most important, step in preparing the report is to define its purpose:

- Who is the audience, for example, an accrediting body, external funding agency or an internal planning/curriculum or management committee?

- What does the audience want to know – for the purposes of external decision-making or for internal change and improvement?

Numerous writers argue that the purpose of the report will also define the extent to which it is descriptive or analytical, operational or strategic, as well as the appropriate levels of contextualisation (Goh, 2000:157; Webb, 2000:28; NAAC, 2007:32; Adams, 2008:18).

According to these writers, the extent to which the report is written in a “warts and all” style in terms of which all observations from the self-assessment are included will be contingent on both the audience and the perception of the consequences of disclosing shortcomings to external reviewers/audiences. However, irrespective of the audience, the report should be used to identify problems and formulate solutions to these problems, as well as to identify opportunities for growth and development. For external audiences, the report should also demonstrate that the institution has robust processes in place. The report may also be a valuable resource as regards other processes such as staff induction; staff training sessions; informing other activities, for example, grant applications, and informing future review processes (Goh, 2000:157; Webb, 2000:28; NAAC, 2007:32; Adams, 2008:18).

Adams (2008:19) and the EUA (2007:15) propose a possible report format as outlined below:

### ***Executive summary***

- Brief description of major findings and recommendations (including areas of strength) of the self-assessment
- In cases where external standards, such as professional accreditation, are relevant, provide an overview of those standards which are applicable to the self-assessment.

## ***Introduction***

- Overview of the institution/area/programme/course/issue, for example, history, size, characteristics, and areas of focus
- Description of the self-assessment process undertaken
- Overview of monitoring and implementation processes to be adopted as regards the recommendations arising from the self-assessment.

### ***For each topic/standard in the report:***

- Description of the topic/standard under review
- Areas of strength
- Overview of evidence considered, including any triangulation of information, where applicable
  - relevant institutional objectives/plans/policies
  - implementation processes and evidence of effectiveness
  - outcomes/results
  - improvements
- Cross-references to other relevant materials in the report
- Analysis of relevant strengths and challenges
- How the situation might be changed/improved or further strengthened
- Recommendations for improvement.

## ***Conclusions***

Summary of major conclusions reached and recommendations (i.e. areas in which action is required) offered in the report. In formulating recommendations, it is useful to limit the number of recommendations and to ensure that they are not trivial and that it is, indeed, possible to

implement them (e.g. according to resource availability). In cases where a self-assessment is focused on specific departments/areas, consider the capacity of that department/area to act on recommendations that involve responsibilities external to their remit (e.g. structural changes to facilities/buildings) (Adams, 2008:19; EUA 2007:15).

**Stage 8: Validate self-assessment outcomes:** Validation, particularly by individuals who were not involved in conducting the review, may enhance the acceptability and credibility of the self-assessment outcomes and recommendations. Validation of the self-assessment outcomes (normally in the form of a report) may be undertaken using a variety of mechanisms, for example, internal peer evaluation (e.g. across faculties/schools, or by a committee); use of external expertise (e.g. an external panel, based on interviewing stakeholders, or an external expert, based on a review of the documentation); or a mixture of both. Existing structures, such as advisory/industry committees, may also be consulted (Adams, 2008:23).

As indicated by the loop in the Figure 2.5, validation at this stage may necessitate some changes to the self-assessment report (*cf.* Adams, 2008:23).

**Stage 9: Develop and monitor actions and implement outcomes:** Once the self-assessment has been finalised, it is essential that the results be communicated. If recommendations for change have been made, as is normally the case, it is critical that clear responsibilities and accountabilities as regards actions to address these recommendations be identified by the area reviewed. The formulation of an action plan, using a format similar to that outlined below, may be an effective tool (Schmitz & Whitworth, 2002:135).

According to Schmitz and Whitworth (2002:135), the regular monitoring of the progress of implementation the action plan is essential. This may be achieved through line management

review, or regular reports drawn up by existing committees, for example, the academic board. It is not possible to overemphasise the importance of this stage and failure to do so will generally mean that the benefit to the institution from what is normally a resource-intensive process will be reduced. Moreover, the lack of outcomes is likely to instil in staff little faith in the process and resistance to participating in future reviews.

Adams (2008:21) suggests an example action plan template as follows:

Recommendations	Action(s) proposed	Responsible office/person(s)	Timeframe for completion	Expected outcome
1.				
2.				
Etc.				

According to Adams (2008: 21), self-assessment outcomes may be most effectively implemented when the achievement of the outcomes is directly linked to recognition and reward systems. It may also be relevant to include and manage certain self-assessment outcomes through existing systems, such as occupational health and safety or risk management frameworks. Other strategies to encourage the implementation of the findings and recommendations may include the use of staff members as “champions” to guide the change required (Adams, 2008:21).

**Stage 10: Evaluate the self-assessment process:** Consistent with quality improvement principles, the evaluation of the self-assessment process by both the participants and other stakeholders will provide valuable lessons as regards the design and development of future self-

assessment processes. Evaluation may be conducted informally, for example, by means of verbal feedback, or more formally, for example, through the administration of questionnaires/surveys (Adams, 2008:21).

#### **2.4.2.6 Summative perspectives on self-assessment**

This section has drawn on the literature review in order to outline some of the key considerations in conducting an effective self-assessment process. It is clear that there is no one “model” for self-assessments, and that the purpose, scope and culture of an institution will significantly influence the process used. However, the literature review has highlighted some common issues to be considered in order to conduct self-review processes that are robust, engage staff, and inform improvements.

Embedding a culture of self-assessment takes time. Critical to the success of any self-assessment process is senior management commitment to improvement, clarity of purpose of the review, adequate resourcing (including appropriately experienced staffing) and meaningful, honest and critical reflection informed by relevant information. Arguably, the most critical aspects of an effective self-assessment process are communication and managing the effective implementation of outcomes in order to generate change and improvement (Schmitz & Whitworth, 2002:135).

In short, self-assessment processes may play a key role in supporting a sustained culture of continuous improvement by providing a mechanism for periodic reflection and the evaluation of processes, systems and outcomes designed to support institutional objectives and future priorities (Lockett, 2005:42).

### 2.4.3 External assessment

As mentioned in the above discussions, sound quality assurance practices combine *internal self-assessment* with *external assessments*. Professional quality assurance bodies are able to monitor an institution's systems through external assessment. There are obvious benefits for an institution in having an external assessor judge the quality of what is being done and in being able to claim external validation of quality as "nobody can be a fair judge of his/her own case" (COL, 2010:2).

External assessment is the other essential element, like self-assessment, which has evolved as an internationally accepted component of quality assurance (Fresen, 2005:34). *External reviewer* is the term generally used to describe an expert from outside of the institution and who participates part in the external quality assurance process. External reviewers share the language, the rationale, and the codes and values of the institution or the discipline/profession of the programme being assessed. They are, therefore, the peers of the people they are visiting. At the same time, they are external to either the programme or the institution and, therefore, are able to provide an outsiders perspective that will enrich the views of the programme or institution. Agencies also use the terms *external peers*, *peer review*, *external reviewers* and *peer assessment* in this sense (Murdoch, 2005:125).

When an institution submits a self-assessment report, a team of external reviewers constituted by the external quality assurance agency is set up with a mandate to analyse the institution's report and validate the claims made (Letuka, 2000:16). This takes place through close analysis of the self-assessment report, discussion and usually also by also visiting the institution. This visit by the review team provides the institution with an opportunity to discuss and identify ways of consolidating and improving the academic environment.

The external review team collects information both before and during the site visits and through personal interviews conducted with the internal and, sometimes, the external stakeholders of the institution. The team is, thus, able to take account of various views, a wide set of data, and observations in order to reach a considered professional judgment and to give advice to the external quality assurance agency on the programme or institution in question. The team is guided by what the external quality assurance agency expects of its reviewers and also by the review process. Accordingly, the work and the effectiveness of the external review panel builds on both the self-assessment and the framework established for the external validation process (COL, 2010:2).

As mentioned above in the discussion on self-assessment, when taking a critical, analytical view of an operation, it is important to take into account whether or not the review is for the purposes of external quality assurance.

#### **3.4.3.1 Outcome of external assessment**

In terms of the three stage model, the self-assessment and the peer review result in a set of outcomes (Murdoch, 2005:125). Based on the self-assessment report of the institution or programme, the recommendations of the review team and the external quality assurance framework, the agency will decide what the outcome of the exercise will be. The agency may take the final decision itself or make a recommendation for a decision to be taken by a public authority, usually the ministry of education.

If the external assessment is externally driven, there may be an element of public disclosure in terms of the outcome, although the extent of such public disclosure varies. It may vary from disclosure of the final outcome only – as in the case of a typical accreditation – to disclosure of

the full review report – as in the case of a typical audit. In general, in systems where the report is the only outcome, this is also made public. However, in systems where there is a formal decision on accreditation status and a report, the extent of public disclosure varies. Decisions that form part of the outcome are generally valid for five to ten years (Ullah, 2005:33).

In short, the internal quality assurance process may be seen as comprising three phases, namely, self-assessment, verification through external or peer assessment and the final report. Nevertheless, there are several factors related to the national context that may have a significant impact on the way in which the three stages described above are conducted.

#### **2.4.3.2 The evaluation criteria in the self-evaluation process**

Quality is context bound and, therefore, when striving for quality, the main question that HEIs may ask themselves is “Do we offer the stakeholder what we promise?” (IUCEA, 2008a:7). This, in turn, implies that the starting point for judging higher education quality will be the higher education institution’s promises (i.e. goals) and the verdict of “quality or no quality” will be based on these promises.

It has been observed in the literature that, although quality is context bound, all HEIs prefer to play a role on the international stage (IUCEA, 2008d:7). This means that it is incumbent on institutions to meet, at least, the basic standards that are applied to HEIs. It was also observed in the literature review that, whether it is an institution conducting a self-assessment or an agency which is conducting an external audit, the areas or aspects considered in the exercise have much in common. Certain areas are key to assessing quality although different HEIs and agencies may have different emphases (INQAAHE, 2009:13). According to the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (CIHE, 1986:23) of the New England Association of Schools and

Colleges, in the document titled *A Guide to Self-study for Commission Evaluation*, evaluation requires that the quality of a higher education institution be judged in relation to some measure or criteria. This document identifies the following four broad areas for self-evaluation criteria, namely

- The institution has clear and publicly stated purposes, consistent with its mission and appropriate to its goals and objectives.
- The institution has effectively organised adequate human, financial and physical resources as regards its educational and other programmes in order to accomplish its purpose.
- The institution is accomplishing its purposes.
- The institution will continue to accomplish its purposes (CIHE, 1986:88).

Questions related to these evaluation criteria may be developed to guide a self-evaluation process in relation to subareas such as governance and administration, human resources, financial resources, physical resources, educational programmes and curricula, institutional services, quality of student achievement, quality of administrative and educational services, quality of institutional life, quality of contribution to outside community, quality of research, and impact of self-evaluation process, etc. (*cf.* Krechel, 2006:19).

According to COL (2010:3), external quality assurance may contribute significantly to internal quality assurance as the baseline for internal quality assurance lies in the establishment of the standard criteria and requirements set forth by the external quality assurance agencies. Several external quality assurance agencies have set criteria for assessment as benchmarks for best practices on the basis of which HEIs may learn to carry out their internal quality assurance processes (IUCEA, 2008c:9).

In line with the above argument, INQAAHE (2008:15) suggests that a set of standards and criteria determined by the external quality assurance agency form the basis for the self-assessment. In Europe, the Bologna Declaration assigned quality assurance an important role in ensuring and assessing quality (Mishra, 2007:23). This prompted the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) to develop the European “Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education Area” (ENQA, 2009:6). The standards cover three aspects, namely, internal quality assurance of HEIs, external quality assurance of higher education, and quality assurance of external quality assurance agencies. However, in view of the fact that the main focus of this study is the internal quality assurance of HEIs, these standards only are discussed. According to the ENQA (2009:6), the following standards of internal quality assurance should be adhered to:

- ***Policy and procedures for quality assurance:*** Institutions should have in place a policy and associated procedures for the assurance of the quality and standards of their programmes and awards. In order to achieve this, institutions should develop and implement a strategy for the continuous enhancement of quality. The strategy, policy and procedures should have a formal status and be publicly available. They should also include a role for students and other stakeholders.
- ***Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards:*** Institutions should have formal mechanisms in place for the approval, periodic review and monitoring of their programmes and awards.
- ***Assessment of students:*** Students should be assessed using published criteria, regulations and procedures which are applied consistently.
- ***Quality assurance of teaching staff:*** Institutions should have ways of satisfying themselves that the staff involved with the teaching of students is qualified and competent to do so.

- **Learning resources and student support:** Institutions should ensure that the resources available for the support of student learning are adequate and appropriate to each programme offered.
- **Information systems:** Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes of study and other activities.
- **Public information:** Institutions should regularly publish up-to-date, impartial and objective information, both qualitative and quantitative; about the programmes and awards they are offering (ENQA, 2009:7).

These criteria are similar to the criteria found in other quality assurance systems such as the Quality Assurance System for the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education in New Zealand, Quality Assurance System for the Australian Universities Commission and the Quality Assurance System for Higher Education of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) of the Council on Higher Education (CHE) in South Africa (HEQC, 2004:6). Most recently, the National Council for Higher Education in Namibia (NCHE) approved a Quality Assurance System for Higher Education in Namibia (NCHE, 2009:14). In comparing the documents from these agencies and various HEIs, it emerged that the standards and criteria used in either internal or external quality assurance around the world have much in common with everyone looking at more or less the same aspects. The wording of the standards and criteria may sometimes be different but, in most cases, they cover the same topics. In short, several criteria and standards for either internal or external quality assessment have been set but they all cover the following aspects – see table 2.1 – and share common features, although the focus and emphasis may differ from country to country and from institution to institution. The quality aspects to be assessed and the criteria for self-assessment are summarised in table 2.1.

**Table 2.1: The quality aspects to be assessed and self-assessment criteria**

<b>The quality aspects to be assessed (focus area/scope)</b>	<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Evidence</b>
<p><b><i>Mission, vision, aims and objectives</i></b>                      (Quality assessment and self-analysis must start looking at the mission and vision formulated, the goals and aims formulated, and the formulated, expected outcomes)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution has in place a clearly formulated mission statement.</li> <li>• The mission statement is publicly known.</li> <li>• The mission statement is in line with the academic and social context of the institution.</li> <li>• The institution has a clear vision of its role in society.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the institution’s vision on the training it provides?</li> <li>• What is the institution’s vision on its research activities?</li> <li>• What is the institution’s vision on its role in society?</li> <li>• Are the vision and mission known to the institutional community and do staff and students share the vision and mission?</li> <li>• Has the vision (i.e. the long-term aims) been translated into a clearly formulated mission statement (i.e. targets to be met in the short-term)?</li> <li>• Has the mission statement been translated into achievable and operationalised aims and objectives?</li> <li>• What is the specific profile of this institution compared with other institutions in the country, in the region, and globally?</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>The policy plan</i></b>                      (The mission and vision must be translated into a clear policy and strategic plan. The mission statement must be operationalised in achievable policy goals)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution has a formally approved and widely disseminated quality assurance policy</li> <li>• The institution has a clear policy plan and strategic plan formulated in line with its mission statement.</li> <li>• The institution has appointed a body, unit or person responsible for setting the quality goals and policy.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the institution have a clear policy which is in line with its mission and vision?</li> <li>• Has the policy been adequately translated into a strategic plan?</li> <li>• Who was involved in formulating the policy and strategic plan?</li> <li>• Has the policy and strategic plan been clearly communicated to all academic and</li> </ul>

		<p>administrative staff as well as the students?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the strategic plan reflect the types of programmes being offered; the choice of research fields; the priorities set; and the main activities of the institution?</li> <li>• Is there periodic monitoring of the degree to which the quality goals are being achieved?</li> </ul>
<b><i>Governance and management</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The governance structure of the institution is clear and adequate</li> <li>• The institution has a clear management structure in terms of which the decision-making process, competencies and responsibilities have been clearly fixed.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What kind of management structure does the institution have in place: centralised and top down or decentralised and bottom up?</li> <li>• Have the role and functions of the central management, faculty management and staff been clearly described?</li> <li>• Does the academic staff participate in the decision-making process as regards teaching, research and community engagement?</li> <li>• Do students participate in decision-making process in relation to their education?</li> <li>• Has the management structure of the institution been endorsed by the academic community?</li> <li>• Is the internal organisation structure fit for purpose?</li> <li>• What management committees are in place? Are they working adequately?</li> </ul>
<b><i>Human resources management system</i></b> (Institutions must have mechanisms in place to ensure that the hiring,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution takes care of high-quality academic staff and support staff by clearly defining their responsibilities, by evaluating their</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How does the institution select and appoint academic and support staff?</li> <li>• Is an adequate staff</li> </ul>

<p>administration and training of their teaching and administrative/support staff are carried out with the necessary guarantees to ensure the staff members are able carry out their functions.)</p>	<p>performance on a regular basis and by means of an adequate staff appraisal system.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution provides for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ A system of staff development to enhance the knowledge and skills of academic and support staff in conducting activities that have a direct impact on the quality of teaching and learning. This should include the formulation of a concrete personnel development plan;</li> <li>○ Evaluation of the effectiveness of the training provided;</li> <li>○ Compilation of records of the education, experience, training, and other essential qualifications required of lecturers and support staff.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• The institution formulates an action plan and evaluates activities in order to encourage students, faculty members and other personnel to be conscientious in their thoughts and speech.</li> <li>• The institution enhances the professional ethics of its students, faculty members and other personnel.</li> </ul>	<p>appraisal system in place for evaluating performance and promotion?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How is staff performance evaluated?</li> <li>• What opportunities are offered for staff development and training?</li> <li>• How does the institution evaluate the efficiency of its staff development activities?</li> <li>• How does the institution stimulate the ethics of its students, academics and other staff?</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Financial management system</i></b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution has adequate funding in order to achieve its goals and aims.</li> <li>• The institution has in place an adequate financial management system.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How is the institution funded? (What percentage of the budget comes from public funding, student contributions, and external funding?)</li> <li>• Are the sources of the financial resources and</li> </ul>

		<p>the conditions attached to the funding stated transparently? Does this restrict the institution's decision-making autonomy in terms of teaching and research?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are the goals and aims of the institution realistic and achievable with the funding provided?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Infrastructure and facilities management system</b> (Institutions should have mechanisms in place that enable them to design, manage and improve their services and physical resources so as to enable student learning to develop appropriately.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The physical resources for the educational activities, including equipment, materials and information technology, are sufficient (classrooms, laboratories, workshops, library, staff offices).</li> <li>• Equipment is up-to-date, readily available and effectively deployed.</li> <li>• The institution's computer centre provides highly accessible and reliable computers and network infrastructure that enables the campus fraternity to exploit fully information technology for the purposes of teaching, research and development, services and administration.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are there a sufficient number of lecture halls, seminar rooms, laboratories, reading rooms, and computer rooms available? Do these meet the relevant requirements?</li> <li>• Is the library adequately equipped for education?</li> <li>• Is the library easily accessible (location, opening hours)?</li> <li>• Are laboratory facilities and support staff sufficient?</li> <li>• Do the laboratories meet the relevant requirements?</li> <li>• Are sufficient audio-visual aids available?</li> <li>• Are the facilities regularly maintained?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Learning resources and student support system</b> (Institutions should ensure that the resources available for student support as regards learning are adequate and appropriate for each programme offered.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The library facilities include technology aided learning materials to enable students to acquire the necessary information, knowledge and skills.</li> <li>• The library uses technology as a learning resource and manages its activities in a technology enabled way.</li> <li>• The library has mechanisms in place in terms of which to evaluate the adequacy and accessibility of resources and services for students on a regular basis and takes appropriate remedial</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the institution have in place an approved and widely disseminated library policy?</li> <li>• Are the library facilities of the institution developed in such a way so that they cater for the requirements of the full-time, part-time and distance students?</li> <li>• Does the library obtain feedback from students, staff, and other users on the adequacy and accessibility of the support facilities and learning resources</li> </ul>

	measures to address any inadequacies.	available at the institution? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is the outcome of the feedback acted upon and are appropriate remedial measures taken to overcome any inadequacies?</li> </ul>
<b><i>Student social welfare</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The facilities for sports and recreation, health facilities, student hostels, guidance and counselling services and student support services are adequate.</li> <li>The institution has in place an approved and widely disseminated social welfare policy that aims at enhancing the quality of student life.</li> <li>The institution has mechanisms in place for the monitoring and evaluation of the student welfare services with reference to international best practices.</li> <li>The findings from monitoring and evaluation, as well as benchmarking processes are used to improve the quality of student welfare services on an on-going basis.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Does the institution have in place an approved and widely disseminated social welfare policy that aims at enhancing the quality of student life?</li> <li>Does the institution have in place an approved and widely disseminated policy on welcoming new students?</li> <li>Does the institution have in place an approved and widely disseminated policy on welcoming foreign students?</li> <li>Are there adequate student counselling services, manned by qualified and competent staff?</li> <li>Does the institution have in place mechanisms for the monitoring and evaluation of student welfare services with reference to international best practices?</li> <li>Are the findings from the monitoring and evaluation, as well as benchmarking processes used to improve the quality of student welfare services on an on-going basis?</li> </ul>
<b><i>Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards</i></b> (Institutions should have formal mechanisms in place for the approval, periodic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The programmes offered: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>are meeting the expectations of the stakeholders</li> <li>have clearly formulated, anticipated learning outcomes</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Does the institution have in place a clear policy on programme development?</li> <li>Does the policy encompass clear rules as regards curriculum development and review,</li> </ul>

<p>review and monitoring of their programmes and awards)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ are coherent</li> <li>○ are up-to-date</li> </ul>	<p>and involve all stakeholders?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Are the academic programmes in line with the mission statement of the institution, national needs and developmental goals?</li> <li>● Are the academic programmes in line with national and international standards?</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Facilitation of learning</i></b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The institution has in place an approved and widely disseminated teaching and learning policy.</li> <li>● The institution has in place an approved and widely disseminated curriculum framework.</li> <li>● The institution deploys learning opportunities appropriate to the learning outcomes, including formal lectures, group work, service learning, etc.</li> <li>● Teaching and learning interaction (curriculum delivery) is carried out in accordance with producing nationally relevant and globally competitive graduates.</li> <li>● There are mechanisms in place for monitoring and evaluating the learning facilitation activities in terms of international best practices.</li> <li>● The findings from the monitoring and evaluation, as well as benchmarking practices, are used to improve learning facilitation activities on an on-going basis.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Does the institution employ sufficient, qualified and experienced academic staff, including contract and part-time staff and tutors, to teach the programmes/courses allocated to them?</li> <li>● Does the institution have in place an approved and widely disseminated teaching and learning policy?</li> <li>● Does the institution deploy learning opportunities appropriate to the learning outcomes, including formal lectures, group work, service learning, etc.?</li> <li>● Are there mechanisms in place for the monitoring and evaluation of the learning facilitation activities, with reference to international best practices?</li> <li>● Are the findings from the monitoring and evaluation, as well as benchmarking practices, used to improve learning facilitation activities on an on-going basis?</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Student assessment</i></b> (Students should be assessed using published criteria, regulations and procedures which are</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The institution has in place well functioning student assessment systems as regards all programmes offered and clear rules to</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● To what extent do the assessments cover the objectives of both the courses and of the programme as a whole?</li> </ul>

<p>applied consistently)</p>	<p>assure the quality of the assessments.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution has a clear policy in place to ensure that the assessments are objective, valid, reliable and trustworthy.</li> <li>• The institution has a policy in place to promote a variety of assessment methods.</li> <li>• The institution ensures that examination committees function adequately and perform the statutory tasks.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do the assessments include clear grading/marking criteria? Are the pass/fail criteria clear?</li> <li>• Is a variety of assessment methods used? What are they?</li> <li>• Are the assessment/examination regulations clear?</li> <li>• Are the student assessment procedures clear? Are they known? Properly followed?</li> <li>• Are any safeguards in place to ensure objectivity?</li> <li>• Are the students satisfied with the procedures?</li> <li>• Are there procedures in place to handle student complaints?</li> <li>• Do clear rules exist for re-assessments and are students satisfied with these?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Quality of staff</b> (Institutions should have ways in which to satisfy themselves that the staff involved with the teaching of students as well as the support staff are both qualified and competent to carry out their duties)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The academic and support staff are both competent and qualified.</li> <li>• The recruitment and promotion of academic and administrative staff are based on a merit system. services</li> <li>• The duties allocated are appropriate to qualifications, experience, and aptitude.</li> <li>• Time management and incentive systems are directed at supporting quality teaching and learning.</li> <li>• There are provisions in place for review, consultation, and redeployment.</li> <li>• Termination, retirement and social benefits are planned and well implemented.</li> <li>• There is a well-planned staff appraisal system based on fair and objective measures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are the academic and support staff qualified to carry out their jobs?</li> <li>• Are there any problems with the human resources? Age profile? Vacancies difficult to fill? What difficulties are there in attracting qualified staff?</li> <li>• What policy is pursued with regard to the employment of staff, both in teaching and research?</li> <li>• How are lecturers prepared for the teaching task?</li> <li>• What about teaching load? The student/staff ratio?</li> <li>• Is staff recruitment based on experience in both teaching and research?</li> <li>• Is there a system of staff</li> </ul>

	<p>in the spirit of enhancement. Appraisals are carried out regularly.</p>	<p>appraisal in place?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What role do teaching qualifications and teaching activities play in the career of the staff members?</li> <li>• What future developments are envisaged?</li> </ul>
<b><i>Student admission</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution has clearly formulated admission criteria for both undergraduate and post graduate programmes.</li> <li>• If selection of students takes place, the procedures and criteria are clear, adequate and transparent.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you analyse the development of the student intake? Reasons to worry? Causes of problems? Prospects for the future?</li> <li>• What are the admission procedures? Are students selected? Is so, how are they selected? What are the selection requirements?</li> <li>• What policy is pursued with regard to the intake of students?</li> <li>• Does the institution aim to increase the intake or to stabilise it? Why?</li> <li>• What measures are taken to affect the quality and size of the intake? What effect do these measures have?</li> </ul>
<b><i>Research management system</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution has in place a clear research policy, setting the direction of research and deciding about research profile and research activities.</li> <li>• The institution has a clear policy on Intellectual Property Rights.</li> <li>• The institution has a clear code of conduct for research, including a code of ethics.</li> <li>• Staff and students undertake quality and relevant research.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the institution have in place an approved and widely disseminated research policy?</li> <li>• Has the institution formulated a policy to protect intellectual property rights? Does this policy function adequately or are there any problems? How does the institution address the problems?</li> <li>• Has the institution formulated a code of conduct and a code of ethics as regards research?</li> <li>• Does the institution have</li> </ul>

		a Research Ethics Committee? If such a committee is in place, how does the institution deal with ethical questions?
<b><i>Community engagement management system</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution has in place an approved and widely disseminated community engagement policy.</li> <li>• The institution has clear guidelines as regards consultancy and community engagement.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What role does the institution play in the local, national and international community?</li> <li>• What are the key community engagement activities of the institution? Which of these lie outside of normal teaching or research? How do they relate to the institution's mission?</li> <li>• What non-profit activities does the institution engage in?</li> <li>• Is there a clear policy on consultancy and the institution's contribution to society and community?</li> <li>• How is the income from consultancy regulated?</li> </ul>
<b><i>Information system</i></b> (Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes of study and all other activities)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution collects, analyses and uses relevant information for the effective management of its programmes of study and other activities.</li> <li>• The institution has mechanisms in place for regularly soliciting feedback from students on the quality of the programmes and courses, learning opportunities, teaching, and the total student learning experience.</li> <li>• The institution regularly undertakes stakeholder surveys (graduates, employers, etc.) and the findings from these surveys are used to improve the quality of teaching and learning, research,</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the institution collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes of study and other activities?</li> <li>• Does the institution regularly undertake stakeholder surveys (graduates, employers, etc.) and are the findings from these surveys used to improve the quality of teaching and learning, research, community service, and other service provision?</li> <li>• Are there mechanisms in place for the monitoring and evaluation of the tracking, review and feedback systems with reference to international</li> </ul>

	<p>community service, and other service provision.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are mechanisms in place for the monitoring and evaluation of the tracking, review and feedback systems with reference to international best practices.</li> <li>• The findings from the monitoring and evaluation, as well as benchmarking practices, are used to improve the process of the tracking, review and feedback systems on an on-going basis.</li> </ul>	<p>best practices?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are the findings from the monitoring and evaluation, as well as benchmarking practices, used to improve the process of the tracking, review and feedback systems on an on-going basis?</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Quality assurance management system</i></b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution has a Quality Assurance Unit.</li> <li>• The institution has in place an approved and widely disseminated quality assurance policy.</li> <li>• The institution has in place an efficient and effective internal quality assurance system.</li> <li>• The institution has mechanisms in place to monitor and evaluate whether its achievements are in line with the expected outcomes on a regular basis.</li> <li>• The institution benchmarks its activities against international best practices.</li> <li>• The institution has a structured method in place for obtaining feedback from stakeholders.</li> <li>• The institution uses the outcomes from monitoring and evaluation, and from benchmarking activities, to improve the quality its activities on an on-going basis.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are achieved outcomes (graduates; research output; and community engagement activities) in line with the formulated goals and aims?</li> <li>• How does the institution ensure that it achieves what it intends to achieve?</li> <li>• If the achievement is not satisfactory, what remedial action does the institution take?</li> <li>• Does the institution make use of the instrument of benchmarking? How is it using the instrument?</li> <li>• Is regular student evaluation carried out? How is this done? Is it adequate?</li> <li>• What happens to the results of student evaluation?</li> <li>• Does the institution collect the opinion and feedback of graduates once they are employed?</li> <li>• Are the complaints or positive feedback received from alumni used to adapt the programmes?</li> <li>• Is there any structured contact with both</li> </ul>

		<p>employers and the labour market to obtain feedback?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are employers satisfied with the quality of graduates?</li> <li>• Are there any specific complaints?</li> <li>• Does the institution have any tools with which to obtain feedback from society?</li> </ul>
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Source: Adopted from HEQC (2003); ENQA (2005:15); European Commission Tempus, 2009:14; Australian Universities Quality Agency (2008:14); IUCEA (2008c:19); INQAHE (2009:3); COL (2009:19); NCHE (2008:23)

Higher education institutions may use the above criteria as reference point for their institutional quality assurance arrangements as these criteria define the areas which should be covered by institutional self-evaluation. However, it should be noted that the methods and levels of implementation may vary, for example, in accordance with the diverse nature of the country and, in the case of this specific study, with the Namibian HEIs in Namibia in general. It is, therefore, essential that the diversity of quality assurance processes be taken into account. The question, thus, arises: Have the Namibian HEIs taken these criteria into account as regards their existing internal quality assurance processes?

It may be argued that self-assessment plays a major role in the continuous improvement of HEIs. The self-assessment is the basis of evaluation, both internally and externally. As regards HEIs, self-assessment links internal and external quality assurance, especially in view of the fact that the self-assessment report may lead to a portfolio, which is a basic document used in the site visits of either peers or audit panels. Clearly this means that self-assessment has an important role in any given quality assurance system.

#### **2.4.4 Best practices benchmarking**

According to Schofield (1998:4), for most HEIs, the desire to learn from each other and to share aspects of good practice is almost as old as higher education itself. With the emphasis on collegiality and the recognition of the international role of higher education such a desire has traditionally manifested in numerous ways, including professional associations (both academic and non-academic), meeting to share common interests; frequent visits by delegations from one higher education system to examine practice in another; professional bodies working collaboratively with institutions to support the academics provided and to mediate standards; and, the like. The improvement of performance through collaboration or comparison with other HEIs is, thus, not a new phenomenon in higher education.

What is new, however, is the burgeoning interest in the formalisation of such comparisons, with the development of benchmarking in higher education constituting one of the recent innovations in this area. According to the ENQA (2005:19–20), the following constitute the basic principles for good benchmarking:

- Benchmarking includes an element of comparison, for example, a set of common criteria against which the programme/institution is assessed.
- Benchmarking implies a strong element of learning and a commitment to improving own practices.
- Benchmarking is an on-going and time consuming process that continues even after a specific project has been concluded. In addition, benchmarking aims to contribute to continuous improvement.
- In order to realise the learning element in the benchmarking process, it is important to establish internal ownership of the process among the various parties concerned.

As has already been indicated, benchmarking has been identified as one of the modern quality assurance mechanisms in HEIs. It emerged from the literature that the practice of benchmarking had its roots in the business and manufacturing industry before it being adapted to the higher education sector. However, there are widely varying ways in which the term is used and it is, thus, necessary to bear in mind that there are definitional problems associated with the term *benchmarking* in the higher education context which need to be taken into account. According to the European Centre for Strategic Management, the term *benchmarking*, like most management buzzwords, is often misunderstood and widely misused (ESMU, 2008:14).

This section provides an overview of the way in which benchmarking may be defined and interpreted; it identifies a number of approaches in terms of which benchmarking is applied in the context of higher education; as well as constructing a framework to assist those HEIs interested in exploring benchmarking to compare one approach with another.

#### **2.4.4.1 Benchmarking: The problems of nomenclature**

It emerged from the literature that there are considerable variations between the different approaches and different practitioners as regards what is understood by the term *benchmarking*, with these variations creating significant problems for those institutions investigating the subject for the first time. In addition, these difficulties in nomenclature go well beyond what may, ultimately, be sterile attempts to find acceptable definitions for their own sake and, instead, reveal considerable cultural and methodological differences of approach underpinning the way in which benchmarking is implemented.

Alstete (1996:6) identifies one aspect of the problem as follows: "The term is used fairly loosely to cover qualitative comparisons, statistical comparisons with some qualitative assessment of

what the statistics mean, and the simple generation of statistical data from a variety of sources which are then published as tables with no attempt at interpretation." On the other hand, Stella and Woodhouse (2007:45) are of the opinion that one of the advantages of the co-operative methodology that was adopted in that benchmarking approach may be viewed as leading to "a true benchmarking process, i.e. in the absence of predetermined benchmarks, the aim is to establish benchmarks through the process ... which can themselves be used in future to guide management in the quest for continuous improvement".

However, part of the problem is not only the fact that different practitioners have their own definitions of benchmarking but that, in the literature on quality assurance and enhancement, the term has come to have a set of meanings which are somewhat removed from what is generally recognised as a benchmark, namely, a standard by which an item may be measured or judged. Schofield (1998:32) notes that, in higher education, many people confuse benchmarking "with collecting statistics or performance indicators and complain about the poor cost-benefit of data collection exercises". Such a problem is not, of course, unique, and there are numerous examples of terminology which is incompatible as regards special usage by the quality movement and the more general use within organisations. Indeed, it is arguable that the widespread, and sometimes ill-informed, application of approaches, such as total quality management and business process re-engineering, has meant that these approaches have, to a large extent, lost any methodological clarity that may have been associated with their original meanings, and they have become, instead, almost "catch-all" phrases for a wide range of change management and reorganisation strategies.

According to Smout (2001:20), any conceptualisation of benchmarking based upon a "non-technical" definition would, therefore, need to include suitably developed statistical performance indicators and associated statistics, providing it was possible to use them for meaningful cross-

institutional comparisons. Smout (2001) argues that benchmarking is more than merely the collection of data and that, instead, benchmarking involves adapting a new approach of continually questioning the way in which processes are performed, seeking out best practices, and implementing new models of operation. In this sense, benchmarking is, thus, a tool of innovation practice that might lead to the institution's innovation.

As has been indicated earlier, the definitions of benchmarking vary widely, from the practical – as a self-improvement tool for organisations which enables them to compare themselves with others, to identify their comparative strengths and weaknesses and to learn how to effect improve improvements – to the participative – "the open and collaborative evaluation of services and processes with the aim of emulating best available practice" (Schofield, 1998:32); through to the global and ambitious: "benchmarking is the process of continuously comparing and measuring an organisation with business leaders anywhere in the world to gain information, which will help the organisation take action to improve its performance" (Jeffrey, 1995:18). Benchmarking is, thus, a way of finding and adopting best practices (Kempner, 1993:41).

In the face of such potential confusion, a number of sources have found it easier to describe the processes that characterise typical benchmarking rather than trying to define it (Kempner, 1993:23). It is, thus, generally recognised that benchmarking is a means of making comparisons of performance, usually with a view to establishing "good", or more ambitiously, "best practice" methods. As such benchmarking is also used to diagnose problems in performance and to identify areas of strength. As in the publication of performance indicators, benchmarking does not necessarily provide solutions to problems and it is an aid to judgment, rather than a substitute for it (ESMU, 2008:20).

In general, the writers cited above support the general conclusion found in the literature on benchmarking that, as a process, benchmarking will not provide simple, formulaic solutions because it generally produces "yes, but" results. Thus, despite the fact that the data being used may be accurate and worthy of comparison, it is essential that any subsequent interpretations take account of the particular circumstances applying to the comparators concerned (Shafer & Coate, 1992:2). Benchmarking may, however, help to identify the key attributes of the function being benchmarked; to determine the key indicators of performance for any particular functions or task as against objectives; to select the appropriate comparators, for example, "similar" HEIs with a particular reputation for doing things well; to compare performance on key indicators; and to examine performance over time (Kempner, 1993:23).

A central purpose of benchmarking is, therefore, to provide managers with an external point of reference or standard for evaluating the quality and cost of their organisation's internal activities, practices, and processes (Jeffrey, 1995:23). Thus, it follows that benchmarking will not be effective if it simply takes a snapshot of a comparative situation and it needs to be an on-going, systematic process for measuring and comparing the work processes of one organisation with those of another by bringing an external focus on internal activities. Having achieved this, managers will need to make judgments based on the nature of the problem to be solved, and the context in which the problem has arisen (Shafer & Coate, 1992:42). For example, the knowledge that a higher education institution of similar size in another part of the city, or even the world, may be enrolling students at a lower cost than the manager's own institution will enable the enrolment process to be examined to ascertain whether it is possible to transfer aspects of the more efficient model to his/her own institution. However, it is unlikely that the solution will be transferable in its entirety because there may be legitimate aspects of the process in each case which will have to be preserved for local reasons (*cf.* Shafer & Coate, 1992:42).

According to the National Assessment and Accreditation Council in India (NAAC, 2007:32), the question posed to management, thus, involves the number of such specific conditions which a higher education institution is prepared to accept, knowing that each of these specific conditions may make its processes more expensive than those of its peers. If the dangers of misleading, once-off snapshots are to be avoided, it follows that benchmarking should be used in order to enable an institution to set targets for the continuous improvement, over time, of its performance in order to achieve best practice (UNESCO, 2007:21).

#### **2.4. 4.2 The practice of benchmarking**

It is clear from the above discussion that process oriented benchmarking within higher education seeks to answer some of the following questions: How well is the higher education institution faring, compared to other HEIs? How good does the institution want to be, and in what areas does it want to excel? As regards the institution as a whole, which aspects are doing the best, and how are they achieving this? How would it be possible for HEIs to introduce into their own practice what is good in similar institutions? How does an institution improve its performance while retaining its unique features? Also, more competitively, in the longer term, how may an institution become better than the best in the context of its own mission (Shafer & Coate, 1992:42)? Shafer and Coate (1992:4) claim that, for many in HEIs, such questions will be provocative as well as constituting a challenge to the traditionally inward-looking decision-making systems of higher education.

It is, however, not only many academics who would find such questions a challenge to their professionalism, but many of the overworked, non-academic staff may also resist the disruption to institutional life that would, inevitably, follow upon answering such questions (Shafer & Coate, 1992:42). Indeed, one of the problems in many benchmarking exercises is the fact that it is

those at senior levels within organisations and who are carrying out the coordination of the benchmarking process who are generally far more enthusiastic about the process than those who are required to produce the necessary data. It is, thus, the mechanisms for internalising the process which need to be addressed in any organisation. According to Stella and Woodhouse (2007:45), benchmarking is no different from the problems encountered in any method of continuous improvement or quality assurance but, unless the process is understood and embraced by the organisation at all levels and the results are seen to be put to good use, there will be little enthusiasm for it. As with any system, if benchmarking requires staff members to undertake activities which have low face validity or which will produce data which is, generally, not already required for other purposes, the staff members will be unlikely to be willing participants in the project. It is, thus, important that any benchmarking exercise uses as much of the data which is already readily available as possible in order to generate the support and cooperation required for a successful outcome (Kempner, 1993:4).

It follows that it is essential that any organisation which is seriously considering introducing benchmarking consider carefully both the type of benchmarking that is appropriate and also the methodology that it wishes to adopt. There are a number of choices available in both areas and it is possible to use these choices to construct a framework in terms of which to classify initiatives and to locate the forms of activity that are currently being undertaken. Alstete (1996:28) identifies five categories of benchmarking, namely, internal benchmarking, external competitive benchmarking, external collaborative benchmarking, external trans-industry (best in class) benchmarking, and implicit benchmarking. These types of benchmarking are briefly discussed as follows (Alstete, 1996:29):

- ***Internal benchmarking*** – comparisons are made between the performances of various departments, campuses or sites within a higher education institution in order to identify best practice within the institution, without necessarily using an external standard against which to

compare the results. This type of benchmarking may be particularly appropriate to those HEIs which are characterised by either a high degree of devolvement to the constituent parts of the institution, a multi-campus environment, or extensive franchise arrangements in terms of which standard programmes are taught by a number of partner colleges in different locations.

- **External competitive benchmarking** – a comparison of performance in key areas is based upon information from those institutions which are perceived as competitors. Although initiatives of this kind may, potentially, be extremely valuable, and also have a high level of “face” validity amongst decision makers, the benchmarking process may be fraught with difficulties. In addition, the process is usually mediated by neutral facilitators in order to ensure that confidentiality of data is maintained.
- **External collaborative benchmarking** – usually involves comparisons with a larger group of institutions which are not immediate competitors. Several such initiatives are reported below, and the methodology is usually relatively open and collaborative. Such schemes may be run by the institutions themselves on a collective basis, although there may be cases in which a central agency or consultant may administer the scheme in order to ensure continuity and sufficient momentum.
- **External trans-industry (best in class) benchmarking** – seeks to look at multiple industries in search of new and innovative practices, no matter what their source. There are some practitioners who regard this as the most desirable form of benchmarking because it may lead to major improvements in performance. However, in practice, it may be extremely difficult to operationalise the results of such cross industry comparisons, and it may also require an extremely high level of institutional commitment to address the inevitable ambiguities that will result.
- **Implicit benchmarking** – refers to the type of benchmarking in terms of which government and central funding agencies seek to apply benchmarking approaches to HEIs. In such cases

it may be difficult to achieve a strong process focus and an analysis of relevant outputs may be all that may be achieved. Although the appropriateness of the term benchmarking in this context may be questioned, it is clear that many of the current activities taking place in higher education systems are of this nature.

Based on the difference types of benchmarking, Alstete (1996:30) suggests that it is the responsibility of higher education leaders to ensure that institutions are working effectively to achieve their strategic goals and realise their missions.

Separate from these types of benchmarking are the methodologies that HEIs may adopt (Schofield, 1998:4). These include:

- ***Ideal type standards (or "gold" standards)*** – a model is created based on idealised best practice, and then used as the basis on which to assess institutions as regards the extent to which they fit the model.
- ***Activity based benchmarking*** – a methodology in terms of which a selected number of activities, which are either typical or representative of the range of academic programmes provided, are analysed and compared with similar activities in other selected institutions. Such activities may be considered solely on their own terms, or may act as a proxy for overall institutional performance.
- ***Vertical benchmarking*** – seeks to quantify the costs, workloads, productivity and performance of a defined functional area, for example, the work of the student admissions department. In view of the fact that this approach is generally based upon existing organisational structures, data collection is often more straightforward than with certain of the other methods. Such initiatives may be limited to the investigation of a single area or they may be multidimensional although, if extensive, they may come close to activity based benchmarking.

- ***Horizontal benchmarking*** – seeks to analyse the cost, workloads, productivity, and performance of a single process that cuts across one or more functional areas, for example, all aspects of student admissions, irrespective of their location within an institution. As such, the results provide a comprehensive review of institutional practice in any particular area, although data collection and interpretation may be highly problematic. Both horizontal and vertical benchmarks are useful diagnostic tools in identifying and prioritising opportunities in order to improve an administrative process or function.
- ***Use by institutions of comparative performance indicators*** – as noted above, this is a highly questionable form of benchmarking, although a number of initiatives reported below have been extremely important in influencing judgments about comparative performances within universities.

The discussions above present the type of benchmarking undertaken and the methodology used as part of a two dimensional matrix in order to create a framework for locating the specific innovations in benchmarking which HEIs may wish to explore.

#### **2.4.4.3 Implementing benchmarking initiatives**

Although it is clear from the above discussions that considerable experimentation on the application of benchmarking in higher education is taking place, there is, nevertheless, a scarcity of evidence as regards the successful implementation of such initiatives by institutions. Indeed, the existing literature suggests that there are few examples of HEIs succeeding in using benchmarking as an effective mechanism for quality assurance (Schofield, 1998:4). It follows that it is necessary to seek factors regarding successful implementation in the broader benchmarking literature. Typically, two main issues emerge, namely, those that concern management and the implementation of benchmarking initiatives; and those that concern the

methodology and processes used. Schofield (1998:6) identifies seven critical mistakes which are, typically, made by HEIs attempting benchmarking, namely, ineffective leadership, poor benchmarking team selection and preparation, inadequate support mechanisms for teams, imprecise objectives, unrealistic time and cost expectations, inadequate understanding of both data and practices, and inappropriate follow through. Filippakou and Tapper (2008:34) support some of these conclusions by observing that a common misconception is that benchmarking is a relatively quick and inexpensive process. Instead, they note that the converse is true and that benchmarking requires considerable time on the part of both senior and middle level staff in institutions if frustration and failure are to be avoided.

To conclude, as far benchmarking is concerned, it is clear from the initiatives described above that a wide variety of methodologies for benchmarking, ranging from the simple to the complex, are successfully practised. Benchmarking is regarded as a valuable tool with which to improve collaborative relationships, obtain information on best practices and increase levels of performance in HEIs. This is in line with Schofield's (1998:36) assertion that "learning from the best is the first step towards becoming the best". Higher education institutions should, thus, be encouraged to embrace benchmarking practices in order to enhance their public accountability and continuous improvement.

In this section, benchmarking was discussed one of the mechanisms for quality assurance within higher education institutions. In the next section, stakeholder feedback will be discussed as another quality assurance mechanism that may be used by higher education institutions.

#### **2.4.5 Stakeholders' feedback**

The following question is often asked, namely, "Who are the stakeholders in higher education?" Clearly the answer to this question is "All those who are favourably affected if the institutions of higher education provide quality education and, conversely, are adversely affected otherwise". According to Brennan and Shah (2000a:79), a stakeholder in a higher education institution is a person (or group) who has an interest in the activities of that institution. On this basis, the academic staff, the students (those presently receiving education in the institution as well as the alumni), the parents and the non-teaching staff are the direct (or internal) stakeholders, since they are all directly connected with the institution concerned.

In a broader context, the students who belong to the catchment zone of the higher education institution and, hence, are likely to be admitted to the institution, the industries, the service sector, other educational establishments, and the government as well as all others who may depend on the institution for the supply of educated/skilled human resources or educational/research services are all indirect (or external) stakeholders (Charmers, 2008:45). In addition, the people in the area in which the institution of higher education is located are also indirect stakeholders. An awareness of both the perception of these stakeholders as well as the suggestions that they may offer, are, thus, extremely important as regards maintaining and improving the quality of both the higher education and the services rendered by the higher education institution concerned.

Anderson (2006:6), Ball and Wilkinson (1994:87), and Carini, Kuh and Klein (2006:7) all provide examples of ways (and the format) in which to obtain the perception and suggestions of the various stakeholders, direct or internal, who concerned with a higher education institution. These include

- academic staff's feedback form
- supporting staff's feedback form
- students' feedback form
- students' feedback questionnaires
- alumni's feedback form
- parents' feedback form
- employer's feedback form.

According to Parri (2006:110), a major advantage to the use of stakeholders' feedback is the fact that such feedback provides the stakeholders in higher education with the opportunity of being actively involved in and contributing to the quality assurance process of the HEIs concerned. The findings from this feedback may, then, be used to address the risks identified and to improve the quality of the higher education offered.

## **2.5 QUALITY ASSURANCE AS A COMPONENT OF "QUALITY CULTURE"**

According to Vaira (2007:135), quality has been part of the culture of higher education institutions since the establishment of modern universities, even though quality assurance has only recently assumed greater importance worldwide. Higher education institutions have, for long, been distinguished by the quality of their products. However, with the establishment of quality assurance agencies in many countries, HEIs began to feel that quality assurance was a kind of imposition on the part of government, even though the institutions had in place inherent systems for maintaining quality (Goh, 2000:3). If the objectives of quality assurance are to be realised and, in fact, deepened, there is a need for the both the internal and the external quality assurance activities within the universities to be synchronised. This, in turn, calls for the evolution and institutionalisation of the quality culture in HEIs.

Quality culture implies that the institution as a whole has accepted the quality elements of the functions it would like to enhance (Goh, 2000:3). This study bases its understanding of “quality culture” on the definition provided by the European University Association’s Quality Culture Project (EUA, 2010:9). The following definition of quality culture developed by this project was selected as the most appropriate for the purposes of this study as it is deemed to be comprehensive:

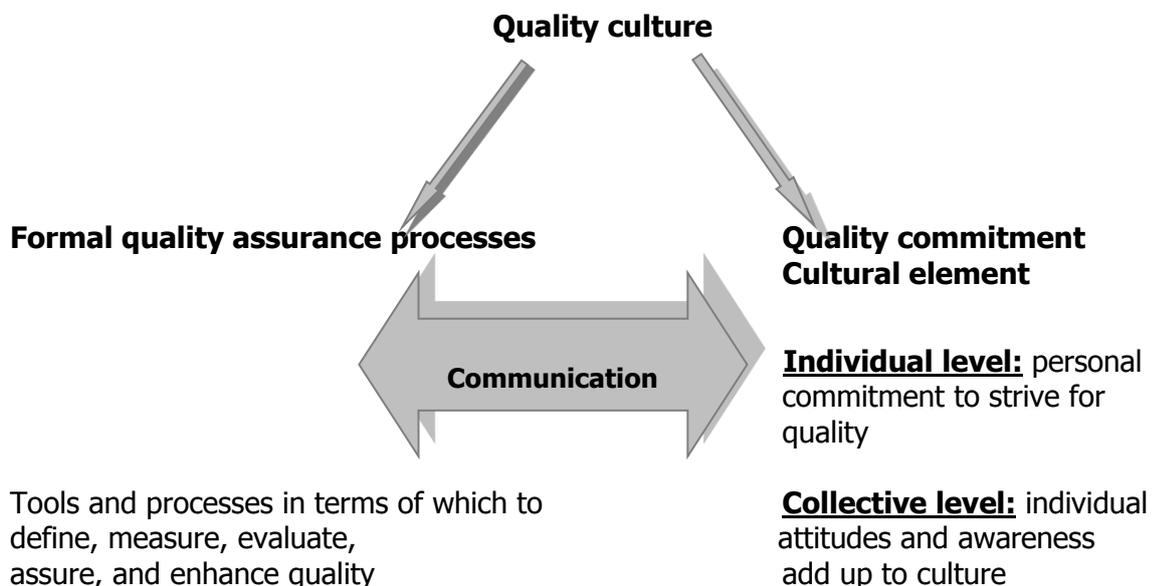
*Quality culture refers to an organisational culture that intends to enhance quality permanently and is characterised by two distinct elements: on the one hand, a culture/psychological element of shared values, beliefs, expectations and commitment towards quality and, on the other hand, a structural/managerial element with defined processes that enhance quality and aim at coordinating individual efforts (EUA, 2010:16).*

Discussions in the field of quality and quality assurance in higher education have tended to be unanimous in advocating the promotion of quality culture, to the extent that quality culture is often considered to be synonymous with “the development of, and compliance with, processes of internal quality assurance” (Harvey, 2009:1).

Quality culture is, however, more than a mere set of rules and procedures which may be “mechanically” negotiated, agreed upon and implemented and, indeed, quality culture encompasses a more implicit consensus on what quality is and how it should be maintained and promoted (Habson, 2007:12). The development of a quality assurance culture requires that students be placed at the centre of the quality assurance activities. This, in turn, requires a partnership and cooperation – the sharing of experiences and team work with the aim of supporting the individual student as an autonomous scholar (Rizk & Al-Alusi, 2009:23). Okafor (2009:62) identified the following as requirements for developing a quality assurance culture within a higher education institution:

- Self awareness/purpose
- Self criticism
- An inbuilt/internalised quality system
- Quality ethos
- Sense of ownership
- Quality culture and internal quality process
- Shift from episodic to continuous quality system
- Shift from input to an alignment of processes to learning outcome
- Building recognition through research and selectivity
- Shift from being judgmental to being developmental

As demonstrated by Figure 2.5, it is crucial that the following two concepts be distinguished, namely, quality culture and quality assurance. Whereas quality assurance processes are both tangible and manageable by institutional decisions, the cultural aspect of quality culture – shared values, beliefs, expectations and commitment – is far more difficult to change (EUA, 2010:16).



Source: EAU (2010:17)

**Figure 2.5: Elements of quality culture**

The basic assumption in figure 2.5 is that quality assurance processes are interrelated and that quality culture may be enforced by structural decisions which stimulate shared values and beliefs (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008:434). According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), a strong culture in HEIs and which is shared by the academic leadership, staff and students helps to reinforce the effectiveness of a quality assurance system (OECD, 2008:312). Quality culture, on the other hand, emphasises a commitment to the enhancement of quality on the part of all employees at all functional levels. *Quality culture* thus is perceived as comprising the following four components, namely:

- Everyone in the institution has a responsibility as regards maintaining the quality of the education or service.
- Everyone in the institution has a responsibility as regards enhancing the quality of the education or service.
- Everyone in the institution understands, takes and uses ownership of the systems which are in place for maintaining and enhancing quality (i.e. continuous improvement).
- The institution satisfies itself that it has effective structures and mechanisms in place so that continuous improvement may be guaranteed (Jonathan, 2000:46).

When describing the way in which a higher education institution could go about developing its quality culture, Lanarés (2008:13) writes:

There are at least two ways of seeing this. In some cases, the institution will introduce quality assurance. This will imply new values which will have to be integrated in the organisational culture. In other ones, the creation of quality assurance will start from the existing quality culture. Once finalised, quality assurance will, in turn, influence and modify the quality culture. This second option may be preferable, considering that some continuity will facilitate change (Lanarés, 2008:13).

In view of the fact that quality, historically, has been part of the culture of the higher education institution culture, it is, thus, essential that the members of a higher education institution's community change their perception of quality assurance as an externally imposed process. When fully accepted, Rizk and Al-Alusi (2009:18) surmise that institutional quality culture will

- create a positive environment leading to continuous improvement
- increase cooperation and competitiveness
- facilitate change and ensure positive staff development
- encourage staff to take academic risks in enquiry and admit failure, when necessary
- engender student input and their participation in quality assurance as key stakeholders
- provide a comprehensive approach for institutional development
- involve multiple internal and external stakeholders.

Consequently, quality assurance will not need to be implemented from above.

More explicitly, Harvey (2009:24) identifies the following characteristics as indicative of the existence of a quality culture in a higher education institution:

- There is academic ownership of quality.
- There is a recognition on the part of both academics and administrators of the need for a system of quality monitoring both to ensure accountability (and compliance, where required) and to facilitate improvement. However, this should not be a "bureaucratic" system.
- Quality culture is, primarily, about the behaviour of stakeholders rather than the operation of a quality system.
- It is essential that the quality system has a clear purpose, which articulates with the quality culture.
- A quality culture places students at the centre.

- A quality culture is about partnership and co-operation, sharing of experiences and team work.
- A quality culture is about supporting the individual as an autonomous scholar, although not at the expense of the learning community. In other words, there is a symbiotic relationship between individual and community.
- Leadership in a quality culture is inspirational rather than dictatorial. In addition, leadership is at all levels within the institution and does not refer merely to the senior managers.
- A quality culture welcomes external critical evaluation from a variety of sources, including formal external evaluations, external peers acting as critical friends, and internal peer review and support.
- At bottom, a quality culture is about facilitating and encouraging reflexivity and praxis; self-reflection, developing improvement initiatives and implementing such initiatives.

Harvey (2004:33) identifies the various cultures to be found in institutions as follows:

- ***Responsive quality culture:*** This type of culture is governed primarily by external demands, takes a positive approach to opportunities and seeks and shares good practice. However, it tends to view quality-related activities and strategies as a solution to externally-driven problems or challenges and, consequently, lacks a sense of ownership or control.
- ***Reactive quality culture:*** This type of culture reacts to external demands and is driven primarily by compliance and accountability, seeks opportunities for reward, and tends to delegate "quality" to a delineated space (e.g. quality office).
- ***Regenerative quality culture:*** This type of culture is focused on internal development and includes co-ordinated internal plans which encompass clear goals. Although external initiatives are recognised they are secondary to a taken for granted commitment to both

continual improvement and organisational learning. In addition, this type of culture embodies the potential for the subversion of externally driven initiatives.

- ***Reproductive quality culture:*** This type of culture is focused on reproducing the status quo and it manipulates situations so as to minimise the disruption from externally driven quality initiatives in order to maintain the status quo. It encompasses established norms and good internal practices with quality as an encoded and unremarkable aspect of the daily practice and professional conduct. It is resistant to either reflections or the reconceptualisation of goals.

In conclusion, it emerged from the above discussions that there is a strong link between a quality culture and internal quality assurance processes, and the impact of quality processes on teaching, learning and research. As such, a strong quality culture that feeds into and embraces the internal quality processes provides the basis for improvement. The benefits of quality culture include the following: It increases cooperation, offers students with a voice that is heard, provides a strong front for an institution in a competitive higher education world as well as providing a context for change. Indeed, a strong quality culture encourages and enables change, champions innovation and allows staff members to take risks, admit failure and learn from their mistakes (EAU, 2010:82).

## **2.6 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

This chapter presented an overview of the literature related to this study. The aim of the literature review was to map out the international best practices for quality assurance that are currently employed in higher education systems with the aim of improving the quality of higher education as a clear understanding of quality related concepts, as presented in the literature, forms the basis for this study. The chapter began with an analysis of different definitions of

quality and the concept of quality assurance concept as verbalised and conceptualised by different stakeholders in different contexts. Quality was defined from the following perspectives, namely, quality as consistency or perfection, fitness for purpose, fitness of purpose, value for money, and transformation. Two major purposes of quality assurance, namely, *accountability* and *improvement*, have been discussed at length in the literature. The link between internal and external quality assurance was also discussed. The literature identified *self-assessment* carried out on cyclical basis at all operational levels of the institution, *benchmarking* and *feedback from stakeholders* as, among other things, the chief internal quality assurance mechanisms which are currently employed by many HEIs in order to maintain and improve the quality of higher education.

Chapter 2 concluded by pointing out that promoting quality culture in higher education is essential for the continuous improvement of institutions. Accordingly, the assurance and improvement of higher education quality are inseparable from the nurturing of a quality culture which is supported by effective quality management structures. The next chapter will deal with the analysis of quality assurance in higher education in the Namibian context.

## CHAPTER 3

### QUALITY ASSURANCE IN NAMIBIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

*At no time in human history has the welfare of nations depended in such a direct manner on the quality and outreach of their higher education systems and institutions (UNESCO, 2009:2).*

#### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents a critical analysis of the literature study related to quality assurance in higher education within the Namibian context. Accordingly, the chapter focuses on the structure of higher education in Namibia, the role of higher education in the Namibian context, and quality assurance in higher education in Namibia. This literature review was guided by the third research question posed in this study, namely:

- What are the key requirements for effective internal quality assurance mechanisms which may ensure best practice in HEIs in Namibia?

This research question was carried forward from chapter 2 in an attempt to place the study specifically within the Namibian context. The remaining questions will be addressed in the empirical part of this study which is contained in chapter 4.

It should be noted that, as has been mentioned in chapter 1, apart from unpublished official documents, there is a dearth of empirical studies on quality assurance in higher education in Namibia. It is, thus, evident that the field of quality assurance in higher education in Namibia has not been researched in any detail as very little published material only on this important topic is

available. The literature review in this chapter was, therefore, premised mainly on the unpublished official documents only.

This study was, thus, deemed relevant as it attempts to bridge the knowledge gap existing in the literature regarding empirical studies on quality assurance in the higher education system in Namibia.

Another observation worth mentioning is that the ministry responsible for education has changed names repeatedly since Namibia's independence in 1990 and has been known as the Ministry of Higher Education, Vocational Training, Science and Technology; the Ministry of Higher Education, Training and Employment Creation; and the Ministry of Higher Education (split from the Ministry of Basic Education). These two ministries (basic and higher education) were then combined to form one Ministry of Education – the situation at the time of this research study (2010). The same applies to the ministers responsible for higher education. Accordingly, readers will, thus, encounter different names for the ministry and/or ministers responsible for higher education in Namibia as pertaining to various timelines and it is hoped that this does not create confusion.

### **3.2 NATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM OVERVIEW**

According to the Government of the Republic of Namibia (GRN), in Namibia, apart from other ministries and agencies, the Directorate of Higher Education in the Ministry of Education (MoE), in particular, plays a major role in and is responsible for the higher education system in the country (MoE 1993:1). The Higher Education Act (Act No. 29, 1996:1-2) defines higher education as

... all learning programmes leading to qualifications higher than Grade 12, or its equivalent  
..., but does not include vocational education and training by a vocational education and training provider which offers vocational education and training programmes on level 1 to

level 5 on the national qualifications framework ... Higher education institution means any institution that provides or intends to provide higher education.

According to this Act, the term *higher education* may be used interchangeably with the term *tertiary education*. In addition, the Act stipulates higher education in Namibia is provided by universities and at a polytechnic; and does not include vocational education.

According to Brannelly, Lewis and Naruhutse (2011:22), the first HEIs in Namibia opened in the 1980s. These included an Academy for Tertiary Education (with courses on teacher education and secretarial skills) and later another Academy for Post-Secondary Training and Technical Skills. Prior to this, students wishing to progress to higher education had had to study either in South Africa or abroad (Otaala, 2003:1; Brannelly *et al.*, 2011:22).

Not long after independence on 29 March 1990, the former President of Namibia, Dr Sam Nujoma, established a special Presidential Commission on Higher Education in January 1991, with the following terms of reference:

- To establish the needs, demands, and scope of higher education
- To determine the organisation and structure of the higher education system, including the nature and location of HEIs
- To analyse the funding of higher education, both recurrent and capital, and to determine the qualifications for admission to, and the duration of, the various higher education courses
- To define the control of higher education and its relationship with the government
- To determine the range and level of programmes in the higher education systems
- To determine the extent of the higher education system in both the medium and the long term in relation to national human resource needs

- To consider the financial support of students at Namibian and foreign educational institutions
- To analyse the promotion, conduct, management and financing of the country's research
- To report to the President on its findings and advise the government on the cost, management, organisation and administration of higher education
- To make comprehensive recommendations to the President on the matters referred to in the terms of reference (Brannelly *et al.*, 2011:22)

The recommendations of this Commission led to the establishment of the University of Namibia (UNAM) on August 1, 1992 by an Act of Parliament (University of Namibia Act 18 of 1992), and also to the transformation of pre-existing higher education institutes, namely, the, Academy for Tertiary Education and the Academy for Post-Secondary Training and Technical Skills, into the Polytechnic of Namibia (PoN) in 1994 by an Act of Parliament (Act No. 33 of 1994) (Otaala, 2003:1). These developments were accompanied by an increase in higher education enrolment, with the gross enrolment rate peaking at more than 10 per cent in recent years. President Nujoma's vision for UNAM at the time was "a centre of higher learning served by dedicated men and women of quality, and producing graduates to uplift the standards of living of the Namibian people" (SARUA, 2009:20).

According to the GRN, the higher education subsector has been a major contributor in terms of the realisation and support of the national development aspirations and goals and also SADC's Millennium Goals. In addition, it has been a direct role player in the current development efforts as regards the reduction in unemployment, increase in productivity, especially in value-added productivity, poverty alleviation, and equitable economic growth, with a view to a better quality of life for all Namibians by the year 2030 (GRN, 2004:1).

The University of Namibia remains the only state-owned national university and enrolls more than 16 000 students on 11 campuses and in eight regional centres countrywide. The latter are managed by the Centre for External Studies (CES), UNAM's distance education and life-long education unit. The 11 campuses include the following:

- Windhoek Main Campus
- Katima Mulilo Campus
- Khomasdal Campus
- Neudamm Campus
- Ogongo Campus
- Hifikepunye Pohamba Campus
- Ongwediva Engineering and Information Technology Campus
- Oshakati Campus
- Rundu Campus
- School of Medicine Campus
- Henties Bay Campus - Sam Nujoma Marine and Coastal Research Centre (SANUMARC)  
(UNAM, 2011:3)

The eight faculties of the University of Namibia offer diverse academic programmes at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. These eight faculties include

- Faculty of Agriculture and Natural Resources
- Faculty of Economics and Management Sciences
- Faculty of Education
- Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
- Faculty of Law

- Faculty of Health Sciences (composed of the School of Medicine, and the School of Nursing and Public Health)
- Faculty of Science
- Faculty of Engineering and Information Technology (UNAM, 2011:3)

In accordance with the National Development Plans (NDP 1, 2 & 3), Vision 2030 – a planning document which presents a clear view of where Namibia is, where it wants to go and the time frame – and informed by its motto "Education, Service, Development", the University of Namibia's programmes are designed to meet the national human resource requirements through quality teaching, research, consultancy and community service (UNAM, 2011:4).

The mandate of UNAM, as stipulated in its enabling legislation (University of Namibia Act 18 of 1992), is "to provide higher education, undertake research, advance and disseminate knowledge, provide extension services, encourage the growth and nurturing of cultural expressions in Namibian, to further training and continuing education, contribute to social and economic development of Namibia, and to foster relationships with any person or institution both nationally and internationally". Its vision is to be a beacon of excellence and innovation in teaching, research and extension services". In addition, its mission is to "to provide quality higher education through teaching, research and advisory services to our customers with a view to producing productive and competitive human resources capable of driving public and private institutions towards a knowledge-based economy, economic growth and improved quality of life" (UNAM, 2011:4).

The university serves the nation in various ways, and also contributes significantly to national reconstruction and development. The University of Namibia continues to work to ensure that it is acknowledged as a higher institution of choice for students as well as a sought after reservoir of

expertise for business and industry, both locally and internationally. The university is home to over 16 000 students, 122 staff members who are PhD holders, 36 professors, and 288 lecturers (master degree holders). In addition, UNAM offers 36 undergraduate degrees, 19 master degrees, and 12 doctoral degrees (PhDs) (UNAM, 2011:4).

The Polytechnic of Namibia (PoN) was established by an Act of Parliament (Act No. 33 of 1994) and started operating as an independent and autonomous institution. The polytechnic comprises the following six schools which offer diverse academic programmes, namely:

- School of Business and Management
- School of Communication
- School of Engineering
- School of Information Technology (IT)
- Graduate School of Accounting
- School of Natural Resources and Tourism

The Polytechnic of Namibia offers certificates, national diplomas, and bachelor and master's degrees. Its vision is to become one of Africa's leading universities of science and technology (PoN, 2010:2). The institution also includes nine regional centres which are run by the Centre for Open and Lifelong Learning (COLL) and which provide open and distance learning (PoN, 2010: 1). Its mission is to contribute to national competitiveness, innovative entrepreneurship and environmental sustainability through the provision of excellent qualifications informed by research and community services.

However, it is not possible for the Government of Namibia alone to address sufficiently the need for higher education in Namibia. In addition to UNAM and PoN, a private university, the

International University of Management (IUM), was established in 1993. IUM started by offering management courses on behalf of foreign professional and academic institutions. IUM offers certificates, diplomas, and degrees in Travel, Tourism and Hospitality, Human Resource Management and Development, Business Administration, Marketing Management, Business Information Systems, Finance Management, Small Business Management, and HIV and AIDS Management (IUM, 2010:2).

According to its mission statement, IUM is striving to establish an international seat of learning in Namibia and to train innovative managers for both the public and the private sectors in both Namibia and other countries in the world; provide a school for productive knowledge workers who will contribute to the internet-based modern global community; provide state of the art internet-based training programmes; and promote national and international unity, cultural understanding and peace as the cornerstones of the global village (IUM, 2010:3). The IUM has been successful in complementing government's effort in providing higher education in Namibia.

The higher education gross enrolment rate (GER) has remained between 5 and 9%, averaging approximately 6%, although the latest figures from 2009 indicate a higher education GER of almost 9% (Brannelly *et al.*, 2011:23). Student enrolment has increased twofold over this time period from fewer than 10 000 students in 1994 to 20 000 in 2008. Approximately 15% of Namibia's education budget is currently spent on higher education (SARUA, 2009:5). According to SARUA (2009), financial assistance to students is available in the form of student loans and needs-assessment grants.

Government policy documents, such as NDPs, Vision 2030 and ETSIP, place considerable emphasis on the development of a knowledge-based economy, and the role of education in developing the required skills set needed to improve growth and productivity (GRN, 2007:16).

The current Education and Training Sector Improvement Plan (ETSIP) includes plans to create a Centre of Innovation, Entrepreneurship and Technology as well as to expand the research capacity within education. The ETSIP also includes specific objectives aimed at improving the quality and relevance of higher education, and addressing both institutional capacity and financing mechanisms (GRN, 2007:36).

### **3.3 THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN NAMIBIA**

As was highlighted in chapter 2 (2.3), higher education plays both an empowerment and a developmental role in nations worldwide (UNESCO, 2009:3). In addition, the World Bank (2002:33) argues that higher education plays a role in nation building and is a critical pillar for human development worldwide. According to Materu (2007:9), higher education is viewed as central to economic and political development, and vital to competitiveness in an increasingly globalised knowledge society. Bloom *et al.* (2006:4) maintain that expanding higher education may promote faster technological catch up and, thus, help to improve a country's ability to maximise its economic output. Bouton and Lucas (2008:56) suggest that, in the world of globalisation, higher education is now regarded as a crucial national asset in advancing society's understanding of multifaceted issues, including involve social, economic, scientific and cultural dimensions and the ability of society to respond to these dimensions. Furthermore, Bouton and Lucas (2008:56) maintain that governments worldwide perceive HEIs as vital sources of new knowledge and innovative thinking; contributors to innovation; attractors of international talent and business involvement into a region; agents of social justice and mobility; and contributors to social and cultural vitality.

UNESCO (2009:3) argues that there is a great need to address the challenge of raising the quality of higher education in Africa to become comparable with that in the developed world. In the

Namibian context, the higher education subsector is a major contributor to the realisation and support of the national development aspirations and goals. In addition, higher education is a direct role player in the current development efforts as regards the reduction of unemployment; increase in productivity, especially in value-added productivity; poverty alleviation; and equitable economic growth resulting in a better quality of life. Furthermore, higher education contributes to the national goals by producing and supplying skilled human resources (MoE 1993:24; Angula, 2009:1).

According to the GRN, the system of higher education in Namibia offers advisory and consultancy services to public bodies, companies and communities. In performing such functions, higher education contributes, inter alia, to scientific advance, the development of the professions and trades, the improvement of productivity, the efficiency of management, the understanding and remedying of social, economic and political problems, the promotion and creation of literature, art and design, music and theatre, the prevention of disease, the care of the sick, and the education of the young (GRN, 2007:43).

### **3.4 CHALLENGES FACING HIGHER EDUCATION IN NAMIBIA**

At present, higher education in Namibia is facing several challenges, some of which are related to the burgeoning demand for quality higher education. Angula (1998:2), in particular, asserts that the Ministry of Education is, increasingly, faced with the challenge of offering higher education to all individuals who qualify to enter HEIs. As in most countries in the world, especially in the developed countries, the demand for higher education has increased among the members of Namibian society who have, traditionally, not participated on a large scale in higher education.

The situation in Namibia may be compared to that in South Africa, where demographic changes in the student population that coincided with the increase in demand for higher education have placed the higher education sector under further pressure to adapt the provision of education and the methodology used (Strydom *et al.*, 1997:145). Higher education, as is the case with any other form of education or training, is a labour intensive enterprise. In addition, increasing remuneration packages, together with the increased demand for higher education, have placed huge financial burdens on parents while governments are hard pressed to provide adequate financial subsidies in order that higher education of adequate levels of quality may be provided to the mass of students. All these influences are impacting on the level of quality of higher education (Strydom *et al.*, 1997:145).

It is to be expected that, despite the pressure, there would be an inherent desire in academics, as professionals, to produce the best levels possible of quality of higher education and that they would want the students who qualify to be of the highest calibre. The increasing numbers of students, together with the increased cost of providing higher education, has led to a greater interest on the part of the taxpaying public in the efficiency and effectiveness of higher education with public accountability becoming an inherent aspect of the activities of HEIs. As government subsidies decline, the contributions of parents and other private bodies/individuals to the cost of higher education increase. In addition, the massification of higher education has also led to increases in the failure and attrition rates at HEIs. The quality of higher education has, thus, become a matter of concern not only to quality assurance agencies and HEIs, but also to all stakeholders. The general public and taxpayers, in particular, are demanding that HEIs be accountable for both their efficiency and their effectiveness (Strydom *et al.*, 1997:145).

In his speech presented at the UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education in Windhoek, Namibia, 5 to 9 October 1998, Nahas Angula, the then Minister of Higher Education, Vocational

Training, Science and Technology of the Republic of Namibia, admitted that higher education in Namibia was facing numerous challenges. In particular, Angula (1998:1) pointed out *underdevelopment* and *globalisation* as the main challenges. According to him, underdevelopment manifests in several ways, including, among other things, poverty, unemployment, malnutrition, disease, environmental degradation and illiteracy. In addition, the growing awareness of the importance of higher education means that the quality of its achievements is no longer taken for granted and left unquestioned (Lagrada, 2002:24). Higher education is, thus, expected to play its role as the dynamo for socio-economic development by performing its functions of human capacity formation, knowledge creation through research, capacity building through teaching and training, and service delivery to the communities in order to enhance socio-economic development. This, in turn, implies that higher education must be relevant to the needs and priorities of the nation. *Relevance* in this context means that it is incumbent on HEIs to devise programmes which address the challenges of underdevelopment (Angula, 1998:1).

Globalisation is the second challenge identified by Angula and means interdependence and competition. For emerging nations, such as Namibia, interdependence may easily translate into dependence while competition, on the other hand, may lead to marginalisation. Higher education, in this regard, is, thus, expected to be a source of empowerment, while higher education may fulfil this role only if it is of high quality (Angula, 1998:2). Globalisation has also increased the pressure on making comparisons between HEIs with these comparisons resulting in the emergence of international rankings (UNESCO, 2009:4). This, in turn, is making it difficult for HEIs in an emerging nation such as Namibia to compete against the world renowned HEIs. Accordingly, if globalisation is to benefit all, including Namibia, there is a need to ensure equity in terms of access and success and to promote and to respect cultural diversity as well as national sovereignty (Angula, 1998:2).

According to the GRN (2007:38), *quality* is another challenge. This involves establishing first-rate faculties and institutions and receiving good products from the school system. However, quality also relates to the outcome – the qualified student and the extent to which the products of higher education system are considered in the labour market, nationally and globally. The GRN (2007:38) asserts that, without quality, the Namibian higher education system is doomed to failure. The ETSIP does, however, make quality a priority with the ETSIP document identifying more challenges confronting current higher education in Namibia (GRN, 2007:38). These challenges include, but are not limited to, improving the institutional development capacity of higher education; improving equitable access and the *quality* of higher education and training, strengthening the research capacity of HEIs, and mobilising additional resources for HEIs.

In addition, the ETSIP document reveals that there is a severe shortage of manpower of the professional and technical fields in the Namibian labour market – in those areas that are regarded as critical to national development, for example, agriculture, fisheries, information technology, science, engineering, geology, medicine, accountancy and business management etc. (GRN, 2007:43). In view of the fact that HEIs worldwide are known to play a key role in training qualified individuals constitutes a challenge to HEIs to fill the gap (UNESCO, 2009:3) and, in the Namibian context, to bridge the skills gap in the economy. It is only quality higher education that will be able to address this problem and, in addition, it is essential that that these quality institutions be more directly responsive to national needs.

It emerged from the literature analysis above that “quality” is a key if higher education is to fulfil its obligation as regards national socio-economic emancipation. Accordingly, it is vital that higher education institutions in Namibia realise the need for quality assurance in their provision of higher education and that they develop a range of quality assurance mechanisms which operate at

different levels for different purposes in order to ensure both *accountability* and *continuous improvement* (Angula, 1998:1).

### **3.5 THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK GOVERNING QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN NAMIBIA**

An efficient, strong and quality higher education system is vital for economic growth in developing countries such as Namibia because such an education system will make a substantial contribution to national economic growth and development by providing jobs, educating the future workforce, grooming future leaders, driving much of the economic and regional success, facilitating important cultural and trade links with other countries and enriching the social and environmental landscape (*cf.* NCHE, 2009: 29). Namibian HEIs are mandated to establish and maintain high quality in the programmes, courses of study and services which they provide. The purpose of quality, as a goal of higher education, is to ensure that HEIs play their developmental role appropriately and effectively (MoE, 1993:28).

If they are to be legitimate, it is essential that the internal quality assurance systems of HEIs operate within the framework of national quality assurance systems (*cf.* Maharasoa, Letuka & Strydom, 2001:132). In this study, it was necessary to analyse the national policies on quality assurance as these policies constitute one of the most important external influences affecting the institutional quality assurance systems of universities in Namibia (*cf.* Griesel *et al.*, 2002:37).

With the maturation of the new democracy since Namibia gained independence in 1990, the role of every sector and its contribution to consolidating and extending this new democracy have reviewed to ensure proper alignment with the developmental goals of the country. The education sector has been a major source of contention as a result of the inequities that had characterised

apartheid education. A number of policies and legislations in education, in general, and in higher education, in particular, have been passed over the years to transform the character of the education (including higher education) provided in the country (NCHE, 2007:18).

This section presents an analysis of the Namibian education scenario with particular reference to the policies and legislation formulated and implemented regarding quality assurance in higher education.

### **3.5.1 The Education White Paper of 1993: *Towards Education for All***

Higher education in Namibia is based on equitable access and education for all. According to the Government of the Republic of Namibia (GRN), the access and quality policy focuses mainly on creating a national higher education system in Namibia with the goal and strategic objective of providing increased access to quality higher education for all, irrespective of race, gender, age, creed, class or disability and of producing graduates with the skills and competencies necessary to meet the human resource needs of the country (GRN, 1994:8).

The Government of the Republic of Namibia has issued a Government White Paper on Education (including higher education) titled *Towards Education for All* (GRN, 2004:8) to ensure that all Namibian people have access to education, irrespective of race, gender, ethnic groups, etc. The White Paper on Education defines four broad goals, namely, equity, quality, democracy and relevance (Angula, 1998:1). In this national document, the Namibian Ministry of Education (MoE, 1993:9) acknowledges that HEIs play a role in many domains with the White Paper calling upon HEIs in Namibia to educate people for those responsibilities that require high level competencies and also for posts in which they will be involved in educating others. In addition, the White Paper provides policy guidance on the way in which to address the responsibilities mentioned above.

The White Paper further assigns responsibilities to HEIs to go beyond merely equipping people to fill jobs. According to this White Paper, it is imperative that HEIs in Namibia realise that they must also equip graduates with the skills needed to create and apply knowledge and to enable them not only to seek existing posts, but more importantly, to create jobs. In addition, it is essential that higher education institutions respond to national needs by facilitating experimentation and stimulating innovation and, thus, ensuring that society does not stagnate (MoE, 1993:11).

Analytically, it would appear that HEIs are confronted with the challenge of striking a balance between "access" to higher education and providing "quality" education. The issue is, thus, whether HEIs are able to cope with the escalating numbers of student enrolments without compromising the quality of the education they offer, given the challenge of the inadequate funding of HEIs. There is abundant empirical evidence to demonstrate that, if there is not effective planning, an increase in student intakes will exert strain on the resources of an institution and this, in turn, may result in poor quality education. Inadequate funding for student support services, libraries, journals and books, ill-equipped laboratories and a shortage of qualified academic staff (imbalance in staff: student ration) could compromise the quality of the higher education output (Ullah, 2005:5).

As stated above, providing education to "all" would imply that even underprepared students would gain access to higher education and it is clear that the standard of the student intake may be a major contributing factor to the deteriorating quality of higher education. Ullah (2005:5) argues that "the question of quality is directly related to the quality of student intake". According to Ullah, the aspect of inadequate admission standards for the entry of students to higher education as a result of an "equal access" policy will hinder the progress of higher education in terms of achieving international standards.

The importance of assuring quality in HEIs in Namibia is reflected in the literature, which suggests that clearly defined and effective, quality focused, strategic policies are necessary in order to raise the standards within higher education (GRN, 2004:40). However, improving the quality of higher education in Namibia requires a strategy that incorporates both internationally recognised standards and, specifically, Namibian needs and priorities and which also evaluates the accomplishments of both students and institutions (MoE, 1993:33). There appears to be a sense of urgency in Namibia to speed up reform in the higher education system with a special focus on quality assurance. There is an increased expectation from both stakeholders and higher education experts as regards quality assurance to guide the higher education reform and, thus, to ensure the country's international competitiveness. In response, the GRN (2004:7), in its policy document entitled *Towards Education for All* has set the following strategic goals for higher education in the country, namely, access and equity, quality, democracy, relevance, efficiency and effectiveness. These strategic goals are briefly discussed below (GRN, 2007:3):

- **Access and equity:** It is a fact that, although the system apartheid has been done away with, Namibian society remains unequal. This means, in turn, that only a few of the Namibians who complete secondary education are able to enter HEIs. There is, thus, a need to build a just society and to improve the access of a diverse range of students to quality higher education. However, achieving access and equity requires eliminating both the overt and less visible patterns of discrimination in higher education and also redressing the persisting consequences of societal inequalities. In addition, there is a need to expand pre-entry programmes for higher education and training.
- **Quality:** This implies that any responses to the requirements of the internationalisation of higher education recognise the importance of improving the quality of higher education. However, improving the quality of higher education requires a strategy that incorporates both internationally recognised standards and which also evaluates the accomplishments of both students and institutions.

- **Democracy:** This goal implies that, if democracy in Namibia is to be nurtured and protected, then HEIs must not only teach about democracy, but they must also be democratic.
- **Relevance:** It is essential that higher education be relevant to national needs. This, in turn implies responding to the diverse needs of a dynamic society; ensuring the labour market responsiveness of higher education; strengthening research and extending the functions of HEIs.
- **Efficiency and effectiveness:** Resource allocation to higher education in Namibia represents a significant part of government expenditure each year. Responding to resource constraints and rationalising public HEIs are, thus, crucial.

### 3.5.2 The Higher Education Policy document: "*Investing in People, Developing a Country*"

The cornerstone of higher education policy development in Namibia is the Higher Education Policy Document, *Investing in People, Developing a Country*. This was adopted in 1998 and was intended to lay the foundation for the Higher Education Act (Act No. 26 of 2003). This policy assists the Ministry of Education in leading and co-ordinating efforts aimed at developing an equitable and sustainable education system (including higher education) in Namibia.

In this policy document, the Ministry of Higher Education, Vocational Training, Science and Technology (1999:33) underscores the important role of HEIs in Namibia in producing young academics who are leaders and specialists in various fields. The policy document urges HEIs in Namibia not only to prepare adequate number of graduates but also to offer quality education. The policy document also acknowledges the importance of establishing and maintaining high quality in the programmes offered. In addition, the document recognises the need for a strategy

incorporating internationally recognised standards and, specifically, Namibian needs and priorities for evaluating the accomplishments of students and institutions (MoE, 1993:33).

### **3.5.3 Higher Education Act of 2003**

The National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) in Namibia was established in 2003 in terms of the Higher Education Act (Act No. 26 of 2003) and launched in November 2005. The NCHE functions at the national level in Namibia. According to the Higher Education Act, the objectives of the NCHE are:

- To promote the establishment of a coordinated higher education system, the access of students to HEIs, and quality assurance in higher education
- To advise on the allocation of funds to public HEIs

With regard to quality assurance, the NCHE both accredits, with the concurrence of the Namibia Qualifications Authority (NQA), the programmes of higher education which are offered by HEIs, and also monitors the quality assurance mechanisms of the HEIs. In addition, the NCHE also advises the Minister of Education, either of its own accord or at the request of the Minister, on quality promotion and quality assurance in higher education (NCHE, Act No. 26 of 2003).

### **3.5.4 Namibia Qualifications Authority (NQA) Act of 1996**

The purpose of the NQA Act (Act No. 29 of 1996) is to provide for the development and implementation of a National Qualifications Framework (NQF). The NQF is a mechanism to manage the wide range of qualifications available in Namibia and to benchmark them against international standards. In other words, the NQF is a national system for organising qualifications in such a way that renders the qualifications both easy to understand and to compare with other similar qualifications from elsewhere. It is a ten level system that is based on learning outcomes

(what a learner knows, understands, and is able to do/practise as a result of his/her learning) and which incorporates qualifications for all kinds of learning, wherever they are gained, e.g. workplace, community, training centres, colleges, and universities. In addition, the NQF is a flexible system that facilitates access to, mobility and progression in education, training and career paths and, thus, which redresses the past injustices of unfair discrimination in higher education. The NQF also serves as a reference point for the quality assurance of HEIs as regards curriculum design, programme development, instructional practices, and assessment. It also forms the basis for NQA accreditation of education and training providers as well as the evaluation of qualifications obtained abroad. It enables higher education institutions in Namibia offering qualifications recognised through the NQF to assure their students that their qualifications are recognised both at home and abroad (NQA Act, Act No. 29 of 1996).

### **3.5.5 University of Namibia Act of 1992**

The University of Namibia (UNAM) is an autonomous institution which is governed by a council and in which academic freedom is well respected (GRN, 2007:37). It was established through an Act of Parliament (University of Namibia Act No. 18 of 1992) which provides for the administration and control of its affairs. According to this Act, the aims of the University of Namibia are

- to provide higher education
- to undertake research
- to advance and disseminate knowledge
- to provide extension services
- to encourage the growth and nurturing of cultural expression within the context of the Namibian society
- to provide further training and continuing education
- to contribute to the social and economic development of Namibia

- to foster relationships with any person or institution, both nationally and internationally (UNAM, 1992:2).

### **3.5.6 Polytechnic of Namibia Act of 1994**

The Polytechnic of Namibia (PoN) is also an autonomous institution which established by an Act of Parliament (Polytechnic of Namibia Act No. 33 of 1994). It is governed by its council and is respected for its academic freedom. This Act provides for the administration and control of the Polytechnic's affairs. According to this Act, the aims of the Polytechnic of Namibia are

- to provide post-secondary career education with due regard for the human resource requirements of Namibia and with emphasis on excellence in teaching within a climate conducive to the intellectual, social, aesthetic, and emotional development of students
- to provide continuing education at a post-secondary school level in order to expand the educational horizon of the adult community
- to conduct applied research
- to develop equal opportunities in respect of its educational programmes as well as admission to, and employment at, the Polytechnic
- to provide an effective collegial governance structure that encourages the active participation of all its constituents and which reflects the collective input of all interested parties (Polytechnic of Namibia Act No. 33 of 1994:2).

### **3.5.7 The Education and Training Sector Improvement Programme (ETSIP)**

Higher education has been identified as the catalyst which will enable Namibia to meet the targeted goals and objectives of both the Namibian Government's Third National Development Plan (NDP3) and also *Vision 2030* – see chapter 1 (1.2). According to the Government of the

Republic of Namibia, *Vision 2030* sets the extremely ambitious target that, by 2030, "Namibia should join the ranks of high income countries and afford all its citizens a quality of life that is comparable to that of the developed world". Thus, *Vision 2030* constitutes the basis of the strategy for rapid economic growth accompanied by equitable social development as part of a broader transformation into a knowledge-based economy (GRN, 2007: 1). With the emphasis on an enhanced quality of life for all, *Vision 2030* calls for the intended rapid *economic growth* to be accompanied by *equitable social development*. However, as a prerequisite to the achievement of *Vision 2030*, the development of high quality human capital is necessary in order to provide for the human resource shortages and knowledge gaps.

According to the GRN (2007:4), Namibia's Vision 2030 provides a long-term development framework for the country in terms of its transformation into a prosperous and industrialised nation, developed by human resources, and enjoying peace, harmony and political stability. The National Development Plans are seen as the main vehicles to translate the long-term vision into action and to enable progress towards the realisation of the Vision by 2030. The Third National Development Plan (NDP3) represents the first systematic attempt to translate the *Vision 2030* objectives into action. The NDP3 was a five year (2007/08 to 2011/12) National Development Plan formulated by the National Planning Commission as the main vehicle both for achieving the nation's objectives and for realising the long-term vision of a "*prosperous and industrialised Namibia*" (NPC, 2008: 1). As encapsulated in the National Development Plans, the GRN understands that education and training are critical components in its strategies for social and economic equality and, thus, it turned its attention to matters of quality (SARUA, 2009:8). According to the Southern African Regional Universities Association's report, entitled *Mainstreaming Higher Education in National and Regional Development in Southern Africa* (SARUA, 2009:6), NDP3 strives to increase the supply of graduates in those skill areas which are

in high demand; increase the supply of middle to high level skilled labour to meet market demand; and strengthen institutional capacity and quality of higher education.

In addition to the NDP3 as a vehicle for the realisation of *Vision 2030*, the Government of the Republic of Namibia (GRN, 2007:2) has developed a fifteen year strategic plan (2006 - 2020), namely, the Education and Training Sector Improvement Programme (ETSIP). The ETSIP is a comprehensive reform document aimed at the education and training sector. According to the GRN (2007:1), a closer examination of the status quo in education systems has revealed low standards in Namibian education while the current education system is contributing inadequately to the creation of a knowledge-based economy, as foreseen in *Vision 2030*, the country's long-term plan for industrialisation. According to the ETSIP document, "... at the current level of performance in education, we will not be producing citizens who are capable of making Namibia a knowledge-based economy as is expected of us in Vision 2030 ..." (GRN, 2007:2). This analysis has labelled Namibia's education and training system as an important tool as regards supporting the realisation of the national development goals, especially the intended transition to knowledge-driven growth and equitable social development. This is as a result of the fact that the education and training system in Namibia is failing to address the skills shortage in the labour market – a situation which may distort the realisation of Vision 2030 if not addressed as a matter of urgency.

According to the Ministry of Education (2003:1), ETSIP is premised on a realisation that it is not possible for a weak education and training system to facilitate the attainment of complex and ambitious development goals. The ETSIP represents a sustained response on the part of the education sector to the realisation of *Vision 2030*. It entails three five-year cycles, with the first cycle covering 2007 to 2012 and, thus, coinciding with the NDP3. The first phase of ETSIP focuses on the "strengthening of the immediate supply of middle to high level skilled labour to meet labour market demands and support overall national development goals" (GRN, 2007:2).

According to SARUA (2009:7), significant productivity growth in Namibia has been set back by the shortage of skilled workers at various levels. An analysis of the total factor productivity (TFP) and growth development productivity (GDP) of the country shows that, while there is growth, it is not significant enough to support "a steady path toward the ranks of high income knowledge-based economies by 2030". Namibia has experienced a real decline in productivity, with the TFP falling from 2,5% between 1991 and 1997 to just 0,5% between 1997 and 2000. At the same time GDP growth levelled to 3,2% in 2005. As has been stated in section 2.4, while the economy is hampered by a shortage of qualified artisans and technicians, the country is also lacking managers, engineers, medical doctors and researchers necessary to create and apply knowledge in order to improve productivity (SARUA, 2009:7).

With the implementation of the ETSIP, the Ministry of Education is determined, among other key components, to improve the quality of higher education (GRN, 2007:1) in an attempt to equip the graduates with the skills that will meet market demand. One of the strategic goals of ETSIP is to improve the effectiveness, *quality*, *efficiency*, and development-relevance of the higher education and training system. In addition, the key purpose of ETSIP is to enhance the education sector's (including the higher education subsector) contribution to a knowledge-based economy (GRN, 2007:2). As regards the higher education subsector, ETSIP includes the following priority areas:

- The improvement of the governance and management of institutions of higher education
- The building of both a strong National Council on Higher Education and an Advisory Council on Teacher Education and Training
- The acceleration of the intake of students in science, mathematics, languages and ICT by establishing bridging programmes
- The expansion of the outputs of qualified teachers, especially as regards senior secondary education (1993:2)

In view of the importance of higher education as a vehicle in the development of countries worldwide (UNESCO, 2009: 2), it is expected that, in the long term, as the overall quality of education and training in Namibia improves, it will have a significant positive impact on the realisation of *Vision 2030*. In addition, it is expected that HEIs in Namibia will respond to these government initiatives by developing and implementing internal quality assurance systems to ensure continuous quality improvement (MoE, 1993:3). UNESCO (2009:4) argues that creating a “quality culture” within institutions is a more effective form of quality assurance than is compliance with external requirements and that sustainability of quality will take place only once a quality culture has been firmly founded. However, the background to the study (Chapter 1) reveals that it has not yet been established what progress HEIs in Namibia have made in response to the growing demand for effective quality assurance and management practices. It is, therefore, imperative that HEIs in Namibia be both proactive and innovative in response to the national development strategies, such as NDP3 and ETSIP, by developing and implementing strategies aimed at both assuring the quality of higher education and improving students learning outcomes, if they are to spearhead the realisation of *Vision 2030*.

### **3.6 STATUTORY BODIES IN THE NAMIBIAN HIGHER EDUCATION SUBSECTOR**

This section presents a discussion on the statutory bodies responsible for quality assurance in the Namibian higher education subsector, namely, the Namibia Qualifications Authority (NQA), and the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE), both of which were established by Acts of Parliament, Acts No. 29 of 1996 and 26 of 2003, respectively, as stated in sections 3.5.3 and 3.5.4.

### **3.6.1 The Namibia Qualifications Authority (NQA)**

The promulgation of the Namibia Qualifications Authority Act (Act No. 29 of 1996) led to the establishment of a statutory body, the NQA. The objectives of the NQA are embedded in the aforementioned Act, and are

- to set up and administer a national qualifications framework
- to be a forum for matters pertaining to qualifications
- to set the occupational standards for any occupation, job, post, or position in any career structure
- to promote the development of, and to analyse, benchmarks of acceptable performance norms for any occupation, job, post, or position
- to accredit persons, institutions and organisations providing education and courses of instruction or training as regards meeting accreditation requirements
- to evaluate and recognise competencies acquired outside of formal education
- to establish facilities for the collection and dissemination of information in connection with matters pertaining to qualifications
- to inquire whether any particular qualification meets the national standards
- to advise any person, body, institution, organisation or interest group on matters pertaining to both qualifications and national standards for qualifications (NQA Act No. 29 of 1996:2).

The implications of the establishment of such a statutory body for HEIs include the fact that the qualifications provided by both public and private institutions in Namibia must meet the minimum legal standards as developed by the NQA and be registered with the NQF.

According to Mutorwa (1995:3), the NQA defines Namibia's standards in all sectors in which education and training takes place; it sets up and administers the NQF; it establishes policy and

procedures for the evaluation and accreditation of qualifications in education and training, as well as establishing policy and procedures for the accreditation of higher education providers. Standards and quality are two key elements of the NQF and are reflected in two of its objectives, namely, setting standards for qualifications and enhancing the quality of learning and competencies (NQA, 2006:4).

### **3.6.2 The National Council for Higher Education (NCHE)**

The NCHE is a statutory body established in 2005 in terms of the Higher Education Act (Act No. 26 of 2003). This Act provides the NCHE with its mandate to operate at a national level and to promote

- the establishment of a coordinated higher education system
- access for students to HEIs
- quality assurance in higher education.

The mandate and approach of the NCHE as regards quality assurance is laid down in *Quality Assurance System for Higher Education* (NCHE, 2009:17). The quality assurance system in Namibia comprises two subsystems, namely,

- programme accreditation, and
- institutional audit.

According to the Higher Education Act (GRN Act No. 26 of 2003:5; SARUA, 2008:3), the implications of this mandate include the following, namely, the NCHE must accredit the academic programmes provided by HEIs as well as monitor the quality assurance mechanisms of the HEIs by means of audits.

Both institutional audit and programme accreditation systems are based on the following premises:

- The primary responsibility for quality assurance lies with the institution concerned.
- Self-evaluation by institutions of their offerings is key to the quality assurance system that has been established.
- It is the quality assurance mechanisms of HEIs in regard to both accreditation and quality assurance that are under scrutiny, rather than the quality of the institution *per se* (NCHE, 2009:8).

### **3.6.3 Perspectives on the legal framework governing quality assurance in the higher education system in Namibia**

The literature review and in depth discussion on national policies provided a broader perspective to both the researcher and readers of this thesis on both the legislation regarding quality assurance in higher education in Namibia as well as the statutory bodies which are responsible for quality assurance at national level. It is evident from the literature analysis that the Namibian Government has put legal frameworks in place to address the issues of quality and quality assurance. The need for quality assurance is necessitated through the establishment of the national quality assurance bodies and development of well articulated policies on quality assurance to ensure that the programmes offered by HEIs are accredited and that quality assurance, as a whole, is promoted in terms of the Higher Education Act (Act No. 26 of 2003:7). The successful implementation of quality assurance systems in HEIs, ideally, requires that the institutional policies on quality assurance be much better streamlined and integrated with both the national quality assurance systems as well as international best practice in quality assurance (*cf. Maharasoa et al., 2001:132*). The question may then arise as to the way in which HEIs in

Namibia analyse, conceptualise and reflect national policies on quality assurance in their internal quality assurance mechanisms and processes. This extremely important question is addressed in chapter 4.

### **3.7 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

The Namibian higher education system is undergoing major expansion at a rapid rate (massification) with the student population in the higher education system in Namibia having increased rapidly over the past two decades from a mere 3000 students in the 1990s to over 30 000 students per year in recent years. At the same time, the demands of stakeholders, such as students, staff, employers, government, funders and society in general for quality higher education are more vociferous than ever before. This, in turn, has attracted the attention of both the authorities and decision-makers in higher education, and also elicited attempts to improve the quality of higher education more than ever before in an effort to be responsive to the needs of the stakeholders. This chapter analysed the literature on recent developments concerning quality assurance in higher education in the Namibian context.

There is evidence that there are well articulated legislations and policies in Namibia which are addressing the quest for quality higher education. It is, thus, essential that higher education institutions in Namibia be prepared to face the challenge of fulfilling the responsibility assigned to them in terms of, *inter alia*, the National Constitution, NDP3, ETSIP, and the Higher Education Act.

The literature review revealed that statutory bodies such as the NQA and the NCHE exist in Namibia and that they are responsible for both quality and quality assurance at the national level. Higher education institutions also need to meet these stakeholders' requirements as regards

quality higher education. It was, however, observed that, although there has been reference to “quality higher education provision” in the legislations and policies that have been in force since the establishment of Namibia's post-independence higher education system, a formalised quality assurance system at a national level came into being only recently with the establishment of the NCHE through an Act of Parliament (Act No. 26 Of 2003). Prior to the implementation of the NCHE’s quality assurance system, the implementation of internal quality assurance systems was optional and there was no standardised, consistent policy in this regard (NCHE, 2009:4).

At the higher education institutional level, quality assurance systems are unevenly spread between institutions. In the past, higher education institutions in Namibia set up internal quality assurance systems of varying quality with the same applying within institutions – in some areas within HEIs there efficient quality assurance systems in operation, whereas, in others, the quality assurance systems are either underdeveloped or have not yet been developed. (NCHE, 2009:4).

In terms of the new quality assurance system for higher education in Namibia, it is incumbent on HEIs both to develop and to implement systematic quality assurance mechanisms which are aligned to the national system (NCHE, 2009:4). It is on this premise that a literature analysis was conducted in this chapter in order both to situate the study within the Namibian context and to ascertain the way in which Namibian HEIs are responding to the stakeholders’ requirements (including the national QA system of the NCHE) for formalised mechanisms for quality assurance that would ensure higher quality education.

The next chapter presents the research approach, research design and methodologies adopted in the study.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESEARCH APPROACH, DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

*Qualitative research is an interdisciplinary, trans-disciplinary, and sometimes counter-disciplinary field. It crosses the humanities and the social and physical sciences. Qualitative research is many things at the same time. It is multi-paradigmatic in focus. Its practitioners are sensitive to the value of the multi-method approach. They are committed to the naturalistic perspective, and to the interpretative understanding of human experience ... (Nelson, Treichler & Grossberg, 1992:4).*

#### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

Novice researchers are often overwhelmed by the abundance of possible research methodologies which make the selection of an appropriate research design for a particular study extremely difficult (Groenewald, 2004:2). The main objective of this study was to evaluate the nature and scope of mechanisms for the assurance of quality and which are being implemented by public and private HEIs in Namibia. In so doing, the study first (Phase 1) investigated the key requirements for the development and implementation of effective quality assurance mechanisms in HEIs to serve as premise for the study of quality assurance mechanisms in HEIs in Namibia so as to ensure best practice (see chapters 2 & 3). This first phase addressed the basic questions posed in chapter 1, namely: ***What are the internal quality assurance mechanisms in place within HEIs in Namibia? What may be said about the implementation stage of these mechanisms, and are there areas for possible improvement?***

Secondly, the study sought to evaluate (Phase 2) the adequacy and effectiveness of the current internal quality assurance mechanisms within public and private HEIs in Namibia, with the

ultimate goal of developing and proposing a framework that would enhance best practice – See annexure to chapter 6.

The research questions addressed in the study included the following:

- How are the HEIs in Namibia implementing quality assurance?
- What formal internal quality assurance mechanisms may be identified in Namibian public and private HEIs and how fully deployed are these mechanisms?
- What processes do these institutions have in place to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of these mechanisms?
- What are these the priorities of these institutions as regards improvement?

The purpose of this chapter (chapter 4) is to discuss the research approach, research design and methodology that were adopted in investigating the questions cited above. Sections 4.2 to 4.10 discuss the research approaches, research designs and methodologies available as well as the reason for selecting a qualitative research approach with a phenomenological research design, the different methods selected in order to collect the data, the population and sampling procedures for the study, the procedures followed to collect the data for the study, the pilot study, the processing, analysis and interpretation of the data, the issues of trustworthiness, reliability and validity, ethical considerations for the study and, finally, the summary and conclusion to the study.

## **4.2 RESEARCH APPROACH, RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA COLLECTION**

### **METHODOLOGY**

Certain theoretical aspects of the research approach, research design and methodology will be discussed before commencing the discussion on the research process itself. The reason for first

discussing the theoretical aspects is to place the study in context with regard to its theoretical and methodological orientation.

#### **4.2.1 Research approach**

All the data collected in a research study reach the researcher either as words or as numbers with the data itself dictating the methodology adopted. Research studies are, therefore, either *quantitative* or *qualitative*. Each of these approaches, namely, the quantitative or the qualitative approach, represents a fundamentally different inquiry paradigm with the researcher's actions being based on the underlying assumptions of the specific paradigm (Bezuidenhout, 2005:159).

Researchers have long debated the relative value of either the qualitative or the quantitative approach (Hoepfl, 1997:1). Quantitative research approaches use experimental methods and quantitative measures to test hypothetical generations. On the other hand, the qualitative approach uses a naturalistic inquiry that seeks to understand phenomena in context-specific settings. Clark (1999:1) argues that there is no single approach which is superior to any other approach and every case, as well as the various research questions, lend themselves to different methodologies. A comparative analysis of quantitative and qualitative research approaches was conducted in order to select the appropriate approach for this study.

##### **4.2.1.1 Quantitative research approach**

The quantitative research approach collects quantitative data. Generally, *data* may be defined as information in a raw or unorganised form and which may be in the form of letters, words, numbers or symbols. *Data* refers to or represents a certain condition, phenomenon, idea or object (Walsh, 2001:7). According to Walsh (2001:7), data are limitless and present all around us. Quantitative research focuses on numbers in terms of which variables are manipulated and

natural phenomena controlled. Quantitative research is also known as the traditional, experimental or positivistic approach, while qualitative research, which deals with the complex nature of phenomena, may also be referred to as the interpretive, inductive, constructivist, or post-positivist approach (Leedy & Ormrod in Bezuidenhout, 2005:159).

According to Walsh (2001:7), quantitative research seeks numerical data (using numerical data as the evidence), with the researcher setting out to collect data that measures “how many”, “how often”, “what percentage or proportion” or “to what extent is there a connection between X and Y?” When the data have been collected, statistical techniques are used to analyse the data in order to establish and describe the numerical patterns and relationships that exist within the data, and to draw conclusions based on this analysis (*cf.* Walsh, 2001:7; Newby, 2010:92). According to Walsh (2001:7) and Newby (2010:92), quantitative data are mostly in the form of numbers such as mathematical scores, personality scales, attitude scores, family income, and export figures etc. In other words, quantitative data are represented by a mass of numbers that are processed, summarised and presented in the form of tables, charts and graphs (Perry, 1994:20).

Clark (1999:1) points out that *quantitative research* is the term which is used to refer to research that may be translated into the examination of functional or cause/effect relationships with reasonable ease. Clark (1999:1), furthermore, maintains that physics, biology, and chemistry, as well as the other natural science-related disciplines, are models for this kind of research, which is logical positivist in approach. The social sciences have borrowed from these models by employing both positivism, which focuses on the efforts to prove that something is true, and post-positivism, which attempts to falsify existing theories. Positivism is the belief that all knowledge comes from experience with a knowable, unchangeable reality (Picciano, 2004:35). Based on this assumption of a “concrete” reality, positivism looks to empiricism as a method of inquiry – empiricism is the science of gaining knowledge through observation. In view of the fact that reality is believed to

be knowable, the goal of the scientist is, thus, to achieve separation from the subject, which is studied in such a way so as to be “objective”, or not to introduce “bias” into the research. Surveys and experimental designs are the primary data collection methods used in positivist approaches, with statistical modelling being employed to achieve generalisation across populations (Perry, 1994:20). While social science has assumed that research into human beings is challenging because no two humans are the same, it has also assumed that humans are similar and, therefore, that it is possible to infer generalities about the human experience. Research into human behaviour has, thus, necessitated a great number of subjects and, hence, the designation quantitative, in order to verify findings that are consistent and generalisable, or “true” across the population (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:331).

Clark (1999:1) describes the following weaknesses as regards quantitative research. Firstly, there is the problem of meaning and operationalisation. Even with well constructed surveys, it is impossible to know whether or not a respondent ascribes the same meaning to a certain word, phrase, or value-laden statement as the researcher. Qualitative research, with its interview style, allows researchers to investigate the meanings made by specific audiences, and is, thus, able to address this issue to some extent. Briefly, quantitative research focuses on statistical or numerical data such as frequencies and percentages (Colman, 2001:22). However, quantitative research was deemed to be unsuitable to address the research objectives of this study.

#### **4.2.1.2 Qualitative research approach**

It is not possible to reduce all data to a numerical form and neither do researchers always want to collect measurements of things. For example, much of social science research conducted is into people’s experiences (Walsh, 2001:7). According to Walsh (2001:7), this type of inquiry adopts a naturalistic approach to investigate people’s feelings and beliefs, or ways of life, and,

thus, it produces non-numerical qualitative data. According to Clark (1999:1), qualitative data are mostly in the form of words, phrases, and sentences and may also include visual images, as well as audio and video recording. Clark (1999:1) further points out that qualitative data represent a mass of words which are obtained from the recordings of interviews, field notes of observations, and the analysis of documents as well as the reflective notes of the researcher. However, this mass of information has to be organised, summarised, described and interpreted. As opposed to the quantitative approach, qualitative research focuses more on human beings.

Van der Merve (2005:99) describes qualitative research as "the use of qualitative data, such as interviews, documents and participant observation data, to understand and explain social phenomena". In other words, qualitative research is a mode of enquiry that normatively describes events and persons scientifically, without the use of numerical data. It is, thus, a field of inquiry that intersects both disciplines and subject matters. Qualitative research is concerned with understanding the way in which people choose to live their lives and the meanings they ascribe to their feelings about their condition. This approach aims to gather an in-depth understanding of human behaviour and the reasons that govern such behaviour (Newby, 2010:114).

The purpose of inquiry in qualitative research is to understand the world from the point of view of those who live in it. While the natural sciences have, as their goal, scientific explanation, the goal of qualitative research is the grasping of understanding, or the "meaning" of social phenomena. Accordingly, qualitative researchers seek not merely to observe and describe, but also to offer a "thick description" of the way in which people, as actors, understand and ascribe meaning to their own actions (Clark, 1999:3). In qualitative research the researchers are able to explore seeming contradictions as well as reasons why persons might report in the way in which they do. Clark

(1999:2) argues further that generalisability, validity, and reliability are questionable in qualitative research.

Briefly, a qualitative research approach focuses on non-numerical data, such as verbal protocols or reports (Colman, 2001:22). Denzin (1994:52) makes the following essential distinctions between qualitative and quantitative research:

The word qualitative implies an emphasis on processes and meanings that are not rigorously examined or measured (if measured at all), in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency. Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry ... . In contrast, quantitative studies emphasise the measurement and analysis of causal relationships between variables, not processes. Inquiry is purported to be within a value-free framework.

Several writers identify what they consider to be the prominent characteristics of qualitative, or naturalistic, research (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990; Eisner, 1991, McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:102). The list that follows represents a synthesis of these writers' descriptions of the qualitative research approach that appear to be applicable to this study:

- Qualitative research uses the natural setting as the source of data. In other words, the qualitative researcher attempts to observe, describe and interpret settings as they are.
- The researcher acts as the "human instrument" of data collection.
- Qualitative researchers use predominantly inductive data analysis.
- Qualitative research reports are descriptive, incorporating expressive language and the "presence of voice in the text".

- Qualitative research has an interpretive character, and is, thus, aimed at discovering the meaning events have for those individuals who experience them and the interpretations of those meanings by the researcher.
- Qualitative research pays attention to the idiosyncratic as well as the pervasive, seeking the uniqueness of each case.
- Qualitative research has an emergent design, as opposed to a predetermined or quantitative design, with qualitative researchers focusing on this emerging process as well as on the outcomes or product of the research.
- Qualitative research is judged using special criteria for trustworthiness.

The particular design of a qualitative research approach depends on the purpose of the inquiry, the information which will be the most useful, and the information which will have the most credibility. There are no criteria for sample size. In addition, judgements about usefulness and credibility are left to the researcher and the reader (Eisner, 1991:39).

A brief comparison between the quantitative and qualitative approaches is presented in table 4.1.

**Table 4.1 Distinguishing characteristics of the qualitative and quantitative approaches**

Question	Quantitative approaches	Qualitative approaches
What is the purpose of the research?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To explain and predict</li> <li>• To confirm and validate</li> <li>• To test theory</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To describe and explain</li> <li>• To explore and interpret</li> <li>• To build theory</li> </ul>
What is the nature of the research process?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focused</li> <li>• Known variables</li> <li>• Established guidelines</li> <li>• Static design</li> <li>• Context free</li> <li>• Detached view</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Holistic</li> <li>• Unknown variables</li> <li>• Flexible guidelines</li> <li>• Emergent design</li> <li>• Context bound</li> <li>• Personal view</li> </ul>

What are the methods of data collection?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Representative, large sample</li> <li>• Standardised instruments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Informative, small sample</li> <li>• Observations, interviews</li> </ul>
What is the form of reasoning used in the analysis?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deductive analysis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inductive analysis</li> </ul>
How are the findings communicated?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Numbers</li> <li>• Statistics, aggregated data</li> <li>• Formal voice, scientific style</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Words</li> <li>• Narratives, individual quotes</li> <li>• Personal voice, literary style</li> </ul>

Source: Leedy and Ormrod (in Bezuidenhout, 2005:136)

The characteristics indicated in table 4.1 under qualitative research describe the way in which this study was approached. Qualitative research was selected as the most suitable approach for this study because it takes a holistic approach to exploring, describing, interpreting and explaining the phenomenon under study, and to building a theory (*cf.* Bezuidenhout, 2005:136). This approach was decided upon for this study as it was felt that it would provide an opportunity to explore a problem which may be classified as a managerial problem, in the natural setting, and to collect and report the informed opinions and views of the research participants.

#### **4.2.1.3 Justification for the selection of the qualitative research approach**

A qualitative research approach was selected as being appropriate for this study because such an approach allows the researcher to understand the phenomenon under study in the natural setting. Hancock (in Bezuidenhout, 2005:144) points out that qualitative research has a number of characteristic features, which manifested in this study in the following ways:

- Qualitative research is concerned with the opinions, experiences and feelings of the individuals producing the subjective data – the opinions, experiences and feelings of the people involved in the phenomenon as they come to the fore during the observation periods and, in this study, of the participants as their opinions, experiences and feelings emerged during the individual interviews and the focus group discussion.
- Qualitative research describes phenomena as they occur naturally – the situation under investigation in this study, namely, internal quality assurance, was not manipulated in any way.
- Understanding of the situation is gained through a holistic perspective – no variables were identified in this study.
- The data are used to generate concepts and theories in order to promote understanding – in this study new theory/knowledge was developed through an inductive approach.
- Qualitative data are collected through direct encounters, one to one or group interviews, or by observation – in this study individual interviews and a focus group discussion were conducted. In addition, information was obtained through observation as the researcher was a participant in quality assurance systems.
- Qualitative sampling techniques are concerned with seeking information from specific groups – in this study use was made of purposive sampling in order to select participants, as expertise and experienced were required in the information sought.
- Criteria to assess both reliability and validity in qualitative studies differ from those used in quantitative studies – validity may be described in terms of truth and the contextual completeness of the report while reliability is about the accuracy in understanding, interpreting and conveying the meaning of what has been said by participants. Trustworthiness was the key criterion in assessing the value of the research process in this study (Bezuidenhout, 2005:144).

A qualitative approach was found to have more strengths as compared to quantitative research as regards this study, as a qualitative approach investigates the why and how of decision-making, and not merely the what, where, and when (Merriam, 2001:13). The qualitative research approach was, thus, chosen as the most appropriate approach for this study, given the nature and purpose of the study. In addition, qualitative research allows for more probing and an in-depth exploration of the participants' viewpoints as well as capturing the "insider" perspective of those who take part in the investigation (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:368).

#### **4.2.2 Research design**

According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010:102), the term *research design* refers to a blueprint for a study or a plan for selecting subjects, research sites, and data collection procedures in order to answer the research questions. McMillan and Schumacher (2010:102) go on to point out that a research design describes the procedures for conducting a study, including when, where, from whom and under which conditions the data will be obtained. In other words, the research design indicates the general plan: how the research is set up, what happens to the subjects, and what methods of data collection are used. Eisner (1991:169) claims that there is a "paucity of methodological prescriptions" for qualitative research as such an inquiry places a premium on the strengths of the researcher rather than on the standardisation. Lincoln and Guba (1985:120) provide a detailed outline for the design of a naturalistic inquiry, which includes these general steps:

- Determine a focus for inquiry. This should establish a scope for the study, and provide inclusion/exclusion criteria for new information.
- Determine the fit of the research paradigm to the research focus. The researcher must compare the characteristics of the qualitative paradigm with the goals of the research.
- Determine where and from whom data will be collected.

- Determine what the successive phases of inquiry will be.
- Determine what additional instrumentation may be used, beyond the researcher as the human instrument.
- Plan data collection and recording modes.
- Plan which data analysis procedures will be used.
- Plan the logistics of data collection, including scheduling and budgeting.
- Plan the techniques that will be used to determine trustworthiness.

The goal of a sound research design is to provide results that may be judged to be credible. Credibility refers to the extent to which the results approximate reality and are judged to be accurate, trustworthy and reasonable (McMillan & Schumacher 2010:102).

McMillan and Schumacher (2010:102) summarise research designs in the qualitative research approach as follows:

- ***Ethnographic research:*** Used for investigating cultures by collecting and describing data that are intended to help in the development of a theory.
- ***Critical social research:*** Used to understand how people communicate and develop symbolic meaning.
- ***Ethical inquiry:*** An intellectual analysis of ethical problems.
- ***Foundational research:*** Examines the foundations of science, analyses the beliefs and develops ways to specify how a knowledge base should change in light of new information.
- ***Historical research:*** Allows the researcher to discuss past and present events in the context of the present condition, and to reflect and provide possible answers to current issues and problems.

- ***Grounded theory:*** An inductive type of research based on or “grounded” in the observations or data from which it was developed.
- ***Phenomenological research:*** The study of phenomenon which describes the “subjective reality” of an event, as perceived by the study population (participants).
- ***Philosophical research:*** Conducted within the boundaries of a specific field of study to use intellectual analyses, in order to clarify definitions, identify ethics, or make a value judgement concerning an issue in their field of study.

It unfolded from a critical analysis of the characteristic of the above research designs of the *qualitative research* approach that a *phenomenological* research design was the most suitable design for this study because such a research design approaches the phenomenon concerned from a holistic point of view by focusing on insider perspective while, at the same time, preventing or restricting bias. Phenomenology may be used to answer questions about meaning and the essences of an experience. However, phenomenology does not generate a theory like certain other types of qualitative research but, instead, it aims to provide insights into the way in which people make sense of the world in which they live (Best and Khan, 2006:269). Accordingly, this study was approached from a qualitative perspective using naturalistic inquiry and phenomenology. Best and Khan (2006:269) describe a naturalistic inquiry as studying real world situations as they unfold naturally and as being both non-manipulative and non-controlling, and with an openness to whatever may emerge. In the next section the theoretical background of a phenomenological research design will be discussed with the aim of placing this study in context.

#### **4.2.2.1 Justification for the selection of a phenomenological research design**

This study used a *phenomenological* research design in order to answer the research questions of the study, which were identified in chapter 1. Literally, phenomenology means the study of

phenomena. These phenomena may be events, situations, experiences or concepts (*cf.* Hancock in Bezuidenhout, 2005:139). Phenomenology (phenomenological emphasis – how individuals experience the world) seeks clarification and understanding of people’s perceptions and experiences, especially the meanings they ascribe to events, concepts, and issues (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2010:24).

According to MacMillan and Schumacher (2010:24), a phenomenological study describes the “meanings of a lived experience” with the researcher “bracketing”, or putting aside, all prejudgments and collecting data on the way in which individuals make sense of a particular experience or situation. McMillan and Schumacher (2010:24) further explain that the aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a description of the “essence” of the experience, while allowing for reflection and analysis. The typical technique used in such an approach involves the researcher conduct lengthy interviews with the informants which are directed towards gaining an understanding their perspectives on their everyday lived experience in terms of the phenomenon concerned.

Byrne (2001:2) maintains that phenomenological researchers hope to gain an understanding of the essential “truths” (i.e. essences) of the lived experiences, in other words, phenomenologists believe that it is possible for truth and an understanding of life to emerge from people’s life experience. Phenomena may be events, situations, experiences or concepts (Hancock in Bezuidenhout, 2005:139). In other words, phenomenology aims to understand and interpret the meaning that participants ascribe to their experience of the phenomenon under study, that is, in this study, quality assurance. Phenomenological research begins by acknowledging that there is a gap in the understanding of the phenomenon and that clarification and illustration will be of benefit (*cf.* Bezuidenhout, 2005:139).

Lester (1999:1) also suggests that the purpose of the phenomenological design is to illuminate the specific and to identify phenomena through the way in which they are perceived by actors in a situation. In this study, the phenomenological research explored the lived experiences of the participants' experience of quality assurance in the HEIs selected. This research design was aimed at seeking an understanding and interpretation of the true meaning that the participants ascribed to their experience of the phenomenon under investigation, namely, quality assurance in HEIs. In other words, this design gave the researcher an opportunity to understand the phenomena they unfolded in their natural setting during the enquiry. In phenomenological research, the researcher believes that knowledge and understanding are embedded in the everyday world.

In particular, it would appear that phenomenology is an effective tool for revealing the qualitative aspects of evaluation. This study has been classified as purely qualitative research, using a phenomenological approach. Furthermore, the study has been classified as exploratory (to gain insight into the phenomenon – the "how" questions), and descriptive (to form a picture of specific details of the phenomenon – the "why" questions). In this study the mechanisms for internal quality assurance in HEIs in Namibia represent the phenomenon being investigated. A further classification of the study is to be found in the fact that it constitutes, simultaneously, both basic research and applied research, as the purpose of the study includes both the advancement of knowledge (creating new knowledge) and finding a solution to a problem (the results may have a practical application) (*cf.* Bezuidenhout, 2005:142).

### **4.3 PILOT STUDY**

For the purposes of validity and reliability and in order to refine methodology, it is virtually mandatory to test out a self-developed measuring instrument in a pilot study – a small-scale

study) (Bezuidenhout, 2005:187). Accordingly, the questions in the interview schedule, the document analysis checklist, and the guide for the focus group discussion were subjected to a pilot study to ensure that they were practical, precise, clear, unambiguous, and free of bias. By testing the questions of the interview schedule, the guide for the focus group, and the checklist for institutional document analysis, the researcher would be in a position to amend these tools. This was carried out with the intention of ensuring optimal responses during the data collection phase and, thus, the pilot study contributed to the enhancement of the researcher's communication pattern in order to ensure the effective facilitation of both the interviews and the focus group discussion.

Two senior staff members with a background in quality assurance and research were selected from one of the participating institutions for the pilot test which was conducted in order to refine the interview schedule, document analysis checklist, and focus group guide in the interests of both validity and reliability. Accordingly, the participants in the pilot study were requested to make comments concerning, but not limited to, format, grammar, ambiguity/clarity, consistency, and the omission of important aspects. The suggestions from the participants in the pilot study were incorporated in the final versions of the research instruments.

#### **4.4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

According to Newby (2010:51), research methodology is concerned with the assembly of research tools and the application of appropriate research rules. Research methods are, in fact, the research tools themselves, for example, questionnaires, observation, and statistical analysis. Lester (1999:1) points out that a phenomenological research study uses a variety of qualitative methods to gather "deep" information and perceptions through inductive inquiry, for example,

interviews, discussions and participant observation, action research, focus meetings, and document analysis to represent information from the perspective of the research participants.

Friend-Pereira *et al.* (2002:51) suggest that the phenomenological researcher has a pool of data collection tools and instruments available, all linked with the various functions. In this study, these tools and instruments include signalling instruments, diagnostic instruments and procedures. These authors further argue that these instruments may also differ in terms of accuracy, the way in which information will be collected and the sources of information. They point out that in general, signalling instruments are used in education programmes to collect data with the goal of bringing the quality of education into the spotlight (illumination) and triggering discussion. On the other hand, diagnostic instruments aim to provide detailed information at course level.

In this study, these procedures will focus attention on the quality assurance analysis in order to ascertain the extent to which the system of quality assurance in the HEIs in Namibia has been adequately developed and is effective. It is, thus, clear that any qualitative data collection tool, such as observation, structured interviews and document analysis, may be used in phenomenological studies.

#### **4.4.1 Data collection methods**

The choice to undertake any kind of research invariably presupposes the careful choice and design of an appropriate methodology for data collection. Data consist of measurements collected as a result of scientific observations (Bless & Higson-Smith, 2004:97). According to Bless and Higson-Smith (2004:97), a research project either succeeds or fails on the quality of the facts on which it is based. In research, the data dictate the methodology (Leedy in

Bezuidenhout, 2005:147). Bezuidenhout explains that the term *data* is plural (singular: datum) and derives from the Latin verb *dare*, meaning "to give". Data, therefore, comprise those facts that any particular situation provides to an observer. The aim of this section is to define the methodology adopted in collecting the data for this study.

An excellent research design and an extremely representative sample are, however, not sufficient to ensure good results if the analysis stems from incorrect data. It is, thus, important to construct an appropriate and accurate instrument for measuring and collecting data. For the purposes of this study a multi-method research methodology was employed. Best and Kahn (2006:22) recommend that, in qualitative studies, triangulation or multiple methods and tools be used to enhance the internal validity of the study. As regards this study the methodology for data collection included the collection of data from a range of sources, namely, a literature review, individual interviews, an institutional document analyses, and a focus group discussion. The study commenced with a literature study. This, in turn, was followed by a phenomenological, explorative and descriptive process with the aim of identifying, through individual interviews, the true meaning of the quality assurance mechanisms and systems in place in the various HEIs in Namibia which had been selected. This design provided the researcher with the opportunity of understanding the phenomenon as it unfolded in the natural setting during the enquiry.

The individual interviews took place simultaneously with the document analysis of the existing quality related documentation of the HEIs concerned. The researcher used the institutional document analysis as a triangulation mechanism to serve as recorded evidence in order to verify and validate the data which had been collected via interviews. These, in turn, were followed by the focus group discussion which acted as a further triangulation mechanism. This threefold

approach was adopted to ensure the triangulation that would ensure proper data collection and information validation (*cf.* Hoepfl, 1997:6).

These tools were deemed the most appropriate with which to collect the data necessary to answer the research questions. Interviews constitute an effective data collection method that was used to prompt the respondents to provide an overview of both the mechanisms of the assurance of quality in their institutions and their experiences as regards these systems, while the document analyses and focus group discussions were used to verify this information. In particular, the document analyses were used as a source of evidence to support the information collected through the interviews while the focus group discussions were used to validate overall research findings (*cf.* McMillan & Schumacher 2010:440).

The following sections present the data collection methods in more detail.

#### **4.4.1.1 Literature review**

The study commenced with a review of current literature on quality assurance in higher education. The purpose of this literature review was to explore relevant national and international literature on quality assurance in higher education in order to formulate a detailed overview of the existing international best practices that formed the premise for this study (Clark, 1999:1; Bless & Higson-Smith, 2004:97).

#### **4.4.1.2 Individual interviews**

According to Babbie (2004:263), an interview represents a data collection technique that consists of an encounter in which one person – the interviewer – asks questions of another –the respondent. Best and Kahn (2006:265) point out that the purpose of interviews is to find out

what is in someone else's mind and, thus, interview questions should, generally, be open-ended in nature. Interviews were identified as one of the most suitable methods for qualitative research using a phenomenological approach. In this study, the interviews were held in order to construct a clear perception of the mechanisms for internal quality assurance of the participating HEIs. All the interviews were conducted in person by means of face to face interviews and meetings.

The elements or various aspects to be covered in the interview questions were made available to the participants well in advance to enable the participants to carry out the appropriate research and to acquire the necessary data and information, prior to the answers being posed during the interviews. Groenewald (2004:11) cautions that it is essential that the researcher allow data to emerge as conducting phenomenology means capturing "rich descriptions of phenomena and their settings".

An interview schedule or guide is a list of questions or general topics which the interviewer wants to explore during each interview (Hoepfl, 1997:5). Individual interviews usually involve a series of open-ended questions based on the topics the researcher wishes to cover (Mathers *et al.* in Bezuidenhout, 2005:156), as well as aspects of these topics (probes) regarding the theme under study, and upon which the researcher will touch during the interview, if the participant does not broach these him/herself.

The interviews were guided by an interview schedule. This enabled the researcher to gain an insight into the participants' experiences, feelings, beliefs and convictions about the phenomenon under study – "to unfold meaning of people's experiences" (*cf.* Groenewald, 2004:4). The interview schedule was compiled on the basis of the researcher's own experience with quality assurance as well as the best practices identified in the literature review, and comprised the

following questions that were posed to participants in order to generate responses (*cf.* Groenewald, 2004:12, Griesel *et al.*, 2002:363):

- What are the characteristics of **"quality"**, as you understand it at your institution?
- What is your understanding of **"quality assurance"** at your institution?
- What is your understanding of the difference between **"quality"** and **"quality assurance"**?  
Give a clear explanation for your answer.
- Do you have an institutional strategic plan or equivalent document? What is the relationship between IQA and the mission, vision, objectives and strategic plan of your institution?
- Has quality assurance been institutionalised or formalised within your institution? When did your institution start introducing a quality assurance system (or equivalent)?
- How was the quality assurance system (or equivalent) introduced?
- If quality assurance has been institutionalised, what are the main purposes of this institutionalising of quality assurance within your institution?
- Does your institution have in place an institutional quality assurance policy statement?
- Mention any effort that has been made within your institution to sensitise the staff and student fraternities as regards quality assurance.
- How does your institution monitor the realisation of its quality assurance goals and objectives?
- Is quality assurance part of the management of your institution? How would you define the role of senior leadership (Vice-Chancellor/Rector, Pro-Vice-Chancellor/Vice-Rector) in implementing the quality assurance system within your institution? What kind of structure does your institution have in place to support the implementation of the internal quality assurance system?
- Do you have an internal evaluation process that provides feedback to the strategic plan in place in order to inform planning and decision-making?

- Which activities does your institutional quality assurance system cover?
- Which mechanisms does your institution have in place in order to ensure the quality of its teaching and learning activities?
- Which mechanisms does your institution have in place in order to ensure the quality of its research activities?
- Which mechanisms does your institution have in place in order to ensure the quality of its community service activities?
- Which mechanisms does your institution have in place in order to ensure the quality of its support services?
- Which stakeholders are involved in the formal quality assurance system at your institution and how does this transpire?
- How does the process for the design of curricula and programmes operate within your institution?
- What kind of processes do you have in place for monitoring curriculum and programme design and implementation?
- What forms of quality related evaluations are conducted at your institution and how often are conducted?
- What kind of information does your institution collect, analyse and use in order to ensure the effective management of the academic programmes and other activities?
- In your views, how fully deployed and how effective are the quality assurance mechanisms to which you alluded?
- What, in your view, are the main challenges faced by your institution regarding the effective implementation of a formalised internal quality assurance system?
- Please provide any further comment on how you perceive the implementation of a quality assurance system within your institution.

- In the light of the foregoing analysis, please suggest any steps that you think should be taken (if any) to improve the current practice within your institution.

The questions listed above were asked in order to encourage the participants to provide extensive information and also to move beyond “yes” or “no” responses. For every question that was asked, the “why” and “how” questions were also pursued so as to prompt and interrogate more detailed explanations of the phenomena in question with the aim of contributing to truth, enabling a promising analysis of the phenomena in question and assisting the researcher in understanding the reason why these phenomena were occurred in the way in which they were. The items in the schedule served their purpose fully.

#### **4.4.1.3 Institutional document analyses**

Another source of information that may be invaluable to qualitative research is an analysis of documents. Documents refer to a variety of possible extant materials that may be accessed by the researcher (Best & Kahn, 2006:267). These documents are considered an important source of information since they are most likely to reflect an authentic situation that occurred at some point in the past. It is further claimed that documents are important because they are less susceptible to alteration as compared to verbal information. Many institutions rely on computerised record-keeping systems and, thus, the researcher requested the participating institutions to use both print documents and databases to serve as evidence in verifying the research findings from the interviews. In addition, verbal responses should ideally be supported by documented evidence to ensure validity and reliability (*cf.* Picciano, 2004:46). This request was clearly stipulated in the consent letter, which was dispatched to the vice-chancellors and/or rectors of the participating institutions requesting permission to conduct research in their institutions.

The analysis of documents, typically, involves content analysis. *Content analysis* has been defined as “a generic name for a variety of means of textual analysis that involve comparing, contrasting, and categorising a corpus of data to test hypotheses (Gall *et al.*, 2007:288). These written communications are of various types, which might include, but are not limited to, official records, letters, minutes of meetings, diaries, and reports, as well as the published institutional documents such as policies, procedures, guideline, and operational manuals (*cf.* Hoepfl, 1997:6).

In this study the researcher used the data collected by means of the institutional document analyses as a triangulation mechanism to serve as recorded evidence that both verified and validated the data which had been collected via the interviews. Permission was obtained from the heads of the institutions to analyse institutional documents with this consent being granted on condition that a high degree of confidentiality was maintained. In view of the fact that documents that are relevant to the research questions do exist in the institutions concerned, not analysing them would have left a gap in the research findings. Accordingly, the institutional documents were analysed because they are a valuable source of information occurring in a natural setting as well as revealing what the institutions do or did and what they value about the phenomenon under investigation. This, in turn, enhanced the validity of the data collected (*cf.* Byrne, 2001:4).

As suggested by Gall *et al.* (2007:292), the following steps were followed in the analysis of the institutional documents:

- Firstly, identification of those documents and records that are representative of the phenomenon under study (quality assurance mechanisms for the selected institutions).
- Secondly, determination of the material which may be of relevance to the study.

- Thirdly, determination of the way in which to collect the material for analysis in accordance with the guidelines for the ethical conduct of research.

Time constraints meant that it was not possible to study all the documents in depth during the onsite visit to the institutions. Accordingly, permission was requested to remove some of the materials and documents from the premises in order to perform an analysis after the onsite visits and interviews. In cases in which it was not possible to remove the material from the natural setting, the researcher made photocopies of the material in its setting for analysis at a later stage. In the case of the documents that were regarded as highly confidential, the researcher devised a strategy for analysing them onsite. The results of the document analysis were interpreted qualitatively.

The aim of the institutional document analyses was to provide documented evidence that the selected institutions did, indeed, have internal quality assurance mechanisms in place to ensure the quality of the educational and services provided, as claimed by the participants during the interviews. The following checklist, which was adopted from the *Quality Assurance Toolkit for Distance Higher Education Institutions and Programmes* and developed by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL, 2009:19 - 198) was used:

**Table 4.2: Checklist for institutional document analyses**

Criteria	Observation		Evidence	Comments
	Yes	No		
The institution has a stated policy with regard to quality assurance and monitoring as regards all aspects of its operations			Strategic plan; quality framework, agenda and minutes of relevant committees, quality circles, internal quality assurance teams, quality assurance procedures, and quality assurance operational manuals.	
There are clearly stipulated internal quality assurance processes for			Strategic plan; quality framework, agenda and minutes of relevant committees, quality circles, internal quality assurance	

both administrative and academic activities			teams, quality assurance procedures, and quality assurance operational manuals.	
Internal quality assurance mechanisms are aligned with the requirements of the relevant external quality assurance agencies.			Strategic plan, management information system, website, internal circles, quality assurance framework and policy assurance policy documents, interaction with staff and students, and documents on external quality assurance agency.	
Quality assurance policies are effectively communicated to all the constituents of the institution.			Strategic plan, management information system, website, internal circles, quality assurance framework and quality assurance policy documents, and interaction with staff and students.	
The primary purpose of the institution's quality assurance policy and procedures is to achieve quality improvement.			Quality assurance framework, quality assurance policy, and quality improvement plans.	
There is a system for implementing and reviewing the quality assurance procedures of the institution.			Strategic plan, institution plans, quality assurance committee structure, minutes of quality assurance committee meetings, interaction with staff, planning and implementation committee meeting minutes.	
The institution constantly monitors and reviews the effectiveness of its quality assurance procedures. The outcomes are used to improve implementation strategies.			Strategic plan, institution plans, quality assurance committee structure and minutes of meetings, interaction with staff, and planning and implementation of committee meeting minutes.	
The institution provides training to its staff as regards the effective implementation of the quality assurance procedures.			Activity schedules, training modules, review documents, minutes and agendas of quality assurance committee and staff committees, performance appraisal forms, and interaction with staff and students.	

Source: Adapted from COL (2009:19–198)

Despite the fact that the COL document had been developed for distance education, it was found to contain useful criteria and evidence that were adapted for the checklist. This was possible as quality assurance in distance education does not differ significantly from quality assurance in conventional, face to face education (*cf.* COL, 2009:3). In addition, all the institutions that

participated in the study offer both distance and face to face modes of study. This checklist fully served its purpose.

#### **4.4.1.4 Focus group discussion**

A focus group is a structured group discussion which is designed to reveal the perceptions and opinions on a defined issue and involves carefully chosen participants who share common characteristics (Bless & Higson-Smith, 2004:110). According to Bless and Higson-Smith (2004:110), focus groups are widely used in many forms of applied research including needs assessment, programme evaluation, curriculum development, product/service design, and market research. Colman (2001:78) defines a focus group as a small group of people selected and assembled for research purposes, to participate in an organised discussion, under the guidance of a moderator, about an issue or topic of which they have personal experience. The data from a focus group discussion include verbal comments made by the participants in response to both the interviewer's questions and the comments from the other participants. In addition, the data from a focus group discussion also include the interviewer's or other observer's field notes regarding informative nonverbal behaviour in the group (Picciano, 2004:59).

In this study, the focus group discussion followed the individual interviews and institutional document analyses and was conducted as a further triangulation mechanism. The participants in the focus group panel were selected on the basis of having certain characteristics in common that related to the topic of the discussion (*cf.* Babbie, 2005:74). Bless and Higson-Smith (2004:110) maintain that it is important that participants in focus group discussions be carefully selected according to explicitly stated criteria. This was achieved by selecting the participants in terms of the criterion that they were members of the selected HEIs who had been assigned the responsibility of overseeing the quality assurance systems of these institutions. In other words,

quality assurance managers and coordinators or equivalent individuals were purposefully asked to be part of the focus group.

According to Bless and Higson-Smith (2004:110), a focus group consists of between four and eight participants who are all interviewed together. The number of the participants in the focus group discussion was slightly higher than recommended by Bless and Higson-Smith, as ten experts participated in this exercise. The procedures as regards the invitations to participate in the focus group discussion were similar to those regarding the invitations to participate in the interviews, and the same ethical principles were followed. This focus group discussion took place on 29 July 2010 at the Conference Centre in Windhoek.

In terms of the items on the schedule for the focus group discussion attention was paid to the principles for focus group questions as proposed by Greeff (in Bezuidenhout 2005:162). These include, *inter alia*:

- Questions to be asked in a conversational manner.
- The questions must be clear, that is, direct, forthright, comfortable and simple.
- Feedback on the items had been gained beforehand from a pilot study and from colleagues of the researcher who are knowledgeable about focus group interviewing.
- The terminology used in the questions was the same the researcher would use when talking about such matters generally.

The focus group discussion lasted for approximately four hours, from 08:30 to 12:30. As with the items in the interview schedule, the items in the focus group discussion questions also served their purpose fully. Comments from the discussion were incorporated in the final version of the internal quality assurance framework. Again, similar to the interviews, the spirit in which the

focus group discussions were conducted was friendly and collegial and, when the participants were thanked for their participation, they indicated that they felt that they also had benefited from the exercise and they expressed their appreciation for having had the opportunity to make a contribution to the study.

The questions in the focus group discussion schedule were the same as in the individual interview schedule, and the order in which the topics were discussed was the same. Additional questions, however, were discussed. These additional questions were specific to the draft internal quality assurance framework, namely

- Is there a place for an internal quality assurance framework such as this in HEIs in Namibia? Please discuss the role such a framework may play in internal institutional quality assurance and whether it would be of value.
- Please discuss the suitability of this framework for use by your higher education institution in its implementation of its internal quality assurance systems. Please provide any comments or recommendations with regard to the framework and its potential use.
- Please discuss the content of the draft framework. Please identify its strengths as well as any areas which may be improved in the framework. Please identify anything that you think is important that has either been left out (gaps) or any unnecessary item that you think could be removed. Please provide comments or recommendations with regard to the content and structure of the framework.

A careful record of the debate between the participants may give the researcher a much deeper insight into a specific topic (Bless & Higson-Smith, 2004:110). The focus group discussion was recorded on the audio voice recorder and the researcher also took notes. The researcher was the interviewer in the focus group discussion. According to Bless and Higson-Smith (2004:110), one

of the advantages of the focus group technique is that it provides an opportunity for the participants to learn from each other and, perhaps, to resolve important dilemmas with which they may be confronted.

#### **4.4.2 Role of the researcher**

Before conducting qualitative research, it is essential that a researcher do three things. Firstly, the researcher must adopt the stance suggested by the naturalist paradigm. Secondly, the researcher must develop the level of skills appropriate for either a human instrument, or the vehicle through which the data will be collected and interpreted. Thirdly, the researcher must prepare a research design that utilises accepted strategies for naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba in Hoepfl, 1997:3). Strauss and Corbin (1990:40) refer to what they call the "theoretical sensitivity" of the researcher. This is a useful concept with which to evaluate a researcher's skill and readiness as regards attempting a qualitative inquiry.

Theoretical sensitivity refers to a personal quality of the researcher. It indicates an awareness of the subtleties of meaning of data. It refers to the attribute of having insight, the ability to give meaning to data, the capacity to understand, and the capacity to separate the pertinent from that which isn't (Strauss & Corbin, 1990:42).

Strauss and Corbin are of the belief that theoretical sensitivity derives from a number of sources, including professional literature, professional experiences, and personal experience. The credibility of a qualitative research report relies heavily on the confidence which the readers have in the researcher's ability to be sensitive to the data and to make appropriate decisions in the relevant field (Eisner, 1991:36; Patton, 1990:55).

In this study, the researcher chose the topic: **Quality assurance mechanisms in higher education institutions in Namibia** because this falls within his area of interest and is directly related to his professional position and task (quality assurance is the primary discipline of the researcher). His main objective in conducting this research study was to contribute to the development of internationally benchmarked internal quality assurance systems in public and private HEIs in Namibia that would ensure best practice. The researcher believed that good internal quality assurance systems would enable HEIs in Namibia to become competitive in the global market.

In view of the fact the researcher was the sole researcher from the development of the research proposal up to the writing up of the thesis, the researcher was in a better position to understand and interpret phenomena as they arose during interviews, document analyses and focus group discussions. During the data collection exercise, the researcher visited the selected institutions in order to conduct interviews and to carry out the document analyses. According to Best and Khan (2006:250), the researcher's personal experiences and insights are an important aspect of any inquiry and also critical to the understanding of the phenomenon in qualitative evaluation studies using phenomenological approaches. Accordingly, the researcher used his personal experience as a quality assurance practitioner. In addition, he also had direct contact with and was close to the participants, situation, and phenomenon under investigation. The researcher's independence is also important in ensuring that the research outcomes may be, to the extent possible, viewed as unbiased (*cf.* Watty, 2006:28).

After the data analysis, based on the research findings, the researcher developed and suggested a quality assurance framework or common frame of reference to be used by HEIs, should it be deemed necessary. This framework acknowledges the fact that HEIs in Namibia are unique and operate under a variety of circumstances. Accordingly, it is both generic and non-prescriptive to

avoid cloning HEIs and to allow them either to assess the suitability of this framework as regards their particular situations, or to customise it to give the “best fit” within the context of individual institutions to meet their own individual needs and requirements. Furthermore, the framework also took into account and incorporated the impact of the continuing globalisation of higher education.

After the researcher had developed the framework, a focus group discussion was conducted at the local convention centre with a panel of experts, all of whom were experienced in quality assurance in higher education. The researcher acted as a facilitator during the focus group discussion. The purpose of the focus group discussion was to allow the panel to contribute, validate the findings and adapt the developed framework, if deemed necessary.

#### **4.5 POPULATION AND SAMPLING**

Qualitative researchers are rarely able to investigate the entire population of individuals, or other phenomena, that interest them; and, instead, they often select a sample to study (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007:165). In this study, it was important to define both the target population and the sampling frame carefully and completely. This section describes the population of this study and the way in which a sample was selected.

##### **4.5.1 Population**

As has been stated above, qualitative researchers attempt to discover something about a large group of individuals by studying a much smaller group. McMillan and Schumacher (2010:128) define a population as a group of elements or cases, in which individuals, objects, or events conform to specific criteria and to which the researcher intends to generalise the results of the research. In short, a population is a group to which results of a study may be generalised. Best

and Kahn (2006:13) define a population as a group of individuals with at least one common characteristic which distinguishes that group from other individuals, and to whom the researcher plans to generalise the research findings. Friend-Pereira *et al.* (2002:52) suggest that it is essential to answer the following questions when making a decision about a population:

- From whom will the information be collected? This question has an important influence on the representivity of the data collected.
- What qualities should this population have? This is important because the accountability and validity of the data depends to a considerable degree on the quality of the population.

This study confined itself to degree-granting HEIs with a university status only. In order to gain an insight about the mechanisms for internal quality assurance, three of these degree-granting institutions participated in the study, namely, a public university, a private university and a polytechnic.

#### **4.5.2 Sampling**

Qualitative researchers use specific procedures to select a sample that represents a defined population (*cf.* Gall *et al.*, 2007:166). A sample of participating institutions and individual subjects were selected for the purposes of this study.

A sample may be defined as a small proportion of the population that is selected for observation and analysis (Best & Kahn, 2006:13), or a group of individuals from whom data are collected (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:129). Sampling is, thus, the process of selecting a number of individuals for a study in such a way that the individuals selected represent the larger group (population) from which they were selected. By observing the characteristics of the sample, the researcher is able to make certain inferences about the characteristics of the population from

which the sample was drawn (Best & Kahn, 2006:13). The purpose of sampling is to enable the use of a sample in order to gain information about a population (Gay, 1987:101). In qualitative research, the dominant sampling strategy is *purposeful sampling* (Patton in Hoepfl, 1997:4). Purposeful sampling seeks information-rich cases which may be studied in depth. Best and Kahn (2006:14) point out that all qualitative research uses the design strategies of emergent design flexibility and purposeful sampling, and that most use naturalistic inquiry. When selecting a sample for phenomenological research, the researcher should use information-oriented sampling, as opposed to random sampling.

In light of the above, the researcher considered that purposeful sampling was the most appropriate technique for this study. In addition, it was used to select participants on the grounds that they were "information-rich" about the phenomenon under study (Patton in Hoepfl, 1997:4; Best & Khan, 2006:250).

McMillan and Schumacher (2001:30) suggest that, in purposeful sampling, the researcher should select particular elements from the population that will be representative or informative as regards the topic of interest. Accordingly, the selection of institutions and participants was guided by the belief that they were "information-rich" and illuminative, that is, they were knowledgeable and informed about the quality assurance mechanisms employed at their institutions.

The first step in selecting the sample for this study was to select the participating institutions. This study confined itself to degree-granting HEIs. There are three degree-granting HEIs in Namibia, two of them are public (a university and polytechnic) and one a private university. All these HEIs were, thus, purposefully selected to participate in this study.

The second step in the sampling process involved choosing participants from the HEIs selected. Careful thought was given to who would be asked to participate in order to try to ensure that a wide range of experiences was represented. The criteria for the selection of the respondents to take part in the interviews stated that the participants must be either directly or indirectly involved in quality assurance at their institutions.

According to Strydom and Delport (in Bezuidenhout, 2005:155), sampling in qualitative research is relatively limited, the size is not determined statistically; and the sampling should involve low costs and not be time-consuming. For the purposes of this study, the sample size was determined by the number of faculties and departments in the institutions selected as it was deemed important to include most of the faculties and departments in this way so as to ensure an unbiased finding (*cf.* Bezuidenhout, 2005:155). Fouché (in Bezuidenhout, 2005:156) recommends that no more than 10 people should be interviewed, while Leedy (1997:162) recommends no more than five to 10 participants for qualitative studies.

Other potential ways in which to define the sample size would be to continue in the field until sufficient information has been collected and, thus, no or very little new information would be collected from successive interviews, that is, saturation would be reached (*cf.* Merriam, 2001:18). The researcher did not choose this option as he had to take both financial implications and time implications into consideration as regards the selection of the sample size so as to render the sample size manageable with the limited resources available. Fifteen participants from each institution were selected, thus totalling 45 participants from the three institutions that had been selected. This number was more than is recommended by both Fouché (in Bezuidenhout, 2005:156) and Leedy (1997:162), but was deemed necessary as a result of the large number of departments within the HEIs. The participants at the selected institutions were chosen from the following staff groupings:

- Top management
- Deans and heads of academic departments
- Directors/managers of various service departments, including quality assurance departments (where they existed)
- Other academic and support service staff members
- Student representatives

It was extremely important to include both academic and support services staff because the quality of support services may have a direct impact on the quality of the core functions of HEIs, namely, teaching, research and community engagement. Although the number of participants was limited to 15 per participating institution, it transpired that saturation, as suggested by Merriam (2001:18), was reached as, in general, the interviews ended up generating similar responses. This provides justification that the sample size was sufficient for this study (*cf.* Groenewald, 2004:9).

#### **4.6 DATA PROCESSING, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION**

Qualitative data analysis is primarily an inductive process of organising data into categories. The identifying patterns and relationships among the categories are then identified using content analysis (*cf.* Marshall & Rossman, 2006:33). Inductive analysis is the process in terms of which a qualitative researcher synthesises and making meaning from the data, starting with specific data and ending with categories and patterns. This section describes the way in which the process of data processing, analysis and interpretation in this study was undertaken in order to move from specific data to general categories and patterns (*cf.* McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:367).

#### **4.6.1 Data processing (handling and management)**

Data processing refers to the process of organising a large amount of data so that coding is facilitated. Organising the data separates it into a few workable units (*cf.* McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:369). Data coding begins by identifying small pieces of data that are stand-alone segments – data elements that may be understood by themselves.

Despite the fact the researcher did make some notes, he tended to rely more on the recording as the whole interview was captured in recording. Nevertheless, the researcher, also made notes as soon as possible after each interview (*cf.* Groenewald, 2004:13), as well as recording reflections on the interview – what was seen, heard, and experienced, hunches and impressions (*cf.* Groenewald, 2004:14).

Data management was crucial in this study, as a result of the sheer volume of field notes and transcripts generated. Each interview was saved in a separate file and a backup was saved on the personal computer. All notes were marked and dated, using the code of the interviewee for easy identification (*cf.* Bezuidenhout, 2005:164).

#### **4.6.2 Data analysis**

Data analysis may be defined as “the systematic study of data so that its meaning, structure, relationships, origins, etc., are understood” (Van der Merve, 2005:39). Hoepfl (1997:6) defines data analysis as “working with data, organising it, breaking it into manageable units, synthesising it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what the researcher tells others or reports”. Lester (1999:1) points out that phenomenological research tends to generate a large quantity of interview notes, audio recording, jottings or other records, all of which have to be analysed. In addition, Lester (1999:1) argues that data analysis

in a qualitative research design tends to be messy as the data do not tend to fall into neat categories and there may be several ways of linking the different parts of the discussions or observations.

Qualitative data analysis involves the range of processes and procedures in terms of which the researcher moves from the qualitative data that have been collected into some form of explanation, understanding or interpretation of the people and situations being investigated (Clark, 1999:4). According to Clark (1999:4), qualitative data analysis is usually based on an interpretative philosophy with the notion of ascribing meaning to the data collected. For example, when analysing interview data, the researcher attempts to identify any or all of the following:

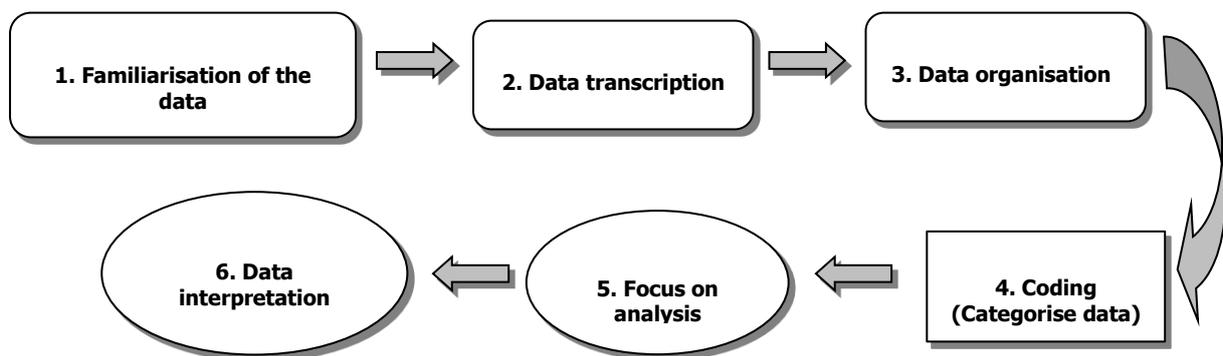
- Someone's interpretation of the phenomenon
- Why they have that point of view
- How they came to that view
- What they have been doing
- How they conveyed their view of their situation
- How they identify or classify themselves and others in what they say (Leedy, 1997:165)

There are many different ways of analysing qualitative data as there are qualitative researchers conducting qualitative research (Sapsford & Jupp, 1996:20). There is, however, agreement in the analysis of quantitative data but *less agreement on how to analyse qualitative data*. Various researchers have proposed different ways of analysing qualitative data. However, there are fortunately some common procedures in the analysis of qualitative data. In this study, since numbers were not used, the researcher looked for categories or themes emanating from the raw data in order to describe and explain phenomena (*cf.* Friend-Pereira *et al.*, 2002:52). The

researcher then analysed the relationships and patterns between the categories or themes that had been identified. These categories or themes were derived inductively as they were allowed to emerge from the data gradually (*cf.* Sapsford & Jupp, 1996:21).

Taylor-Power and Renner (2003:1) point out that qualitative data consist of words and observations, not numbers. In addition, the narrative responses may be long and detailed. In this study, both data analysis and data interpretation were required in order to bring order, make sense of the data and render them understandable for readers of this thesis. Data analysis requires creativity, discipline and a systematic approach (Van der Merve, 2005:40).

According to Leedy (1997:165), analysing qualitative data involves reading through the interview or focus group transcripts and other data, developing codes, coding the data, and drawing connections between discrete pieces of data. This study adopted a common approach for analysing qualitative data, namely, *content analysis* (Lacey & Luff (2001:15). This approach involved the following five steps, namely, *familiarisation of the data, data transcription, data organisation, coding (categorising the data), and data interpretation*. Figure 4.1 provides a visual representation of the steps that were followed in the data analysis process in this study.



Source: Adapted from Lacey and Luff (2001:15)

**Figure 4.1: Steps in qualitative data analysis**

**Step 1 Familiarisation of the data:** Good qualitative data analysis depends on understanding the data (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003:2). In this study, there was massive amount of data collected through the individual interviews, institutional document analyses and focus group discussion in the form of audio records and field notes. The analysis of data begins with the researcher getting to know the data. In this study the researcher listened to the audio voice recorder several times and wrote down any impressions he had had as he was going through the data. He also read and reread the field notes and made memos and summaries before beginning the formal data analysis (*cf.* Lacey & Luff, 2001:16).

Also, merely because one has data does not mean that they are quality data and it may happen that the information provided does not add either meaning or value. Before beginning any analysis, it is essential that the quality of the data first be checked in order to ascertain whether data are both complete and understandable (*cf.* Taylor-Power & Renner, 2003:2).

**Step 2 Data transcription:** Data transcription refers to the process whereby the researcher converts the audio recorded data and handwritten field notes obtained from the individual interviews, institutional document analyses and focus group discussion into verbatim form (*cf.* Gearing, 2004:16). This is done because, if the researcher were to analyse directly from an audio recording or field notes, there is every likelihood that he/she may include those sections that appear relevant or interesting to him/her while ignoring others. On the other hand, a transcript of everything that has been recorded (audio and field notes) enables the researcher to obtain a complete picture of what had happened and the chances of the analysis being biased are minimised.

**Step 3 Data organisation:** The data sets used in qualitative data analysis tend to be extremely large (Merriam, 2000:10). In this study the data collected in the form of field notes and video

recordings were very lengthy and required intensive examination, understanding and reading. After transcription, it was necessary to organise or categorise the data into sections that were easy to retrieve. The aim of data organisation is to enable the researcher to keep a clear mind and not to be overwhelmed by the sheer volume of data. The data organisation for analysis in this study was done by grouping the responses question-by-question so as to make it easier to analyse the data (*cf.* Gearing, 2004:16).

***Step 4 Coding (categorising the data):*** Coding refers to a process which involves reducing the overwhelming amount of data (texts, sound or video recordings, and graphic files) by identifying the content of more or less encompassing data segments and categorising the data (Taylor-Power & Renner, 2003:4). In other words, coding involves reading the data and ascribing labels or codes to the themes and ideas that have been identified. In this study, coding was carried out in order to gain an understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, the way in which the respondents perceived the phenomenon under review, and the nature and types of relationships involved. This process enabled the reduction of the data into smaller groups which were more manageable. In addition, this process also helped the researcher to perceive relationships between these categories and patterns of interaction (*cf.* Lester, 1999:2).

During coding, the raw qualitative data in the transcript were examined and sections of text units (words, phrases, sentences or paragraphs) extracted. Different codes or labels are then assigned to the themes and ideas so that they may be easily retrieved at a later stage for further comparison and analysis, and the identification of any patterns (*cf.* Groenewald, 2004:17). In so doing, passages of text (or other meaningful phenomena, such as parts of images) are identified and labels applied to them to indicate that they are examples of a specific thematic idea. This labelling or coding process enables the researcher to retrieve quickly and to collect together all

the text and other data associated with a particular thematic idea so that the data may be examined together and different cases compared (*cf.* Picciano, 2004:14).

According to Lacey and Luff (2001:20), coding may be based on themes, topics, ideas, concepts, terms, phrases or keywords found in the data. In this study, the key phrases from the audio records and the field notes were extracted from the text and given labels. In order to bring meaning to the words before the researcher, themes or patterns (ideas, concepts, behaviours, interactions, incidents, terminology or phrases used) were identified and organised into coherent categories that summarised and brought meaning to the text (*cf.* Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003:2). All the passages and chunks of data that were coded in the same way, that is, given the same label, were judged to belong to the same theme (*cf.* Lacey & Luff, 2001:20).

A set of codes was developed using both predefined codes as well as codes that had emerged from the data (*cf.* Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003: 4). According to Taylor-Powell and Renner (2003: 4), predefined codes represent the categories and themes that the researcher expects to find, based on his/her prior knowledge while emergent codes are those that become apparent as the researcher reviews the data. In cases in which a theme identified from the data does not quite fit the codes that already exist, these themes are added and new codes created for each. This type of coding allows for the emergence of crucial, but previously uncovered, issues and connections. The data that were found to be unusable were left uncoded. After sets of data have been coded, thematic charts of data are created so that it is possible to read the data easily across the entire dataset. In this study, the coded data were then summarised question by question in order to illustrate the key themes in each interview question.

Once the data had been both coded and summarised, the next step was to focus on the data analysis examining the various summaries and synthesising the findings across multiple data sources.

***Step 5 Focus on the analysis:*** After data coding, the next step is to focus on the data analysis in order to identify the themes, patterns and relationships or connections that have emerged within and across the categories of data (*cf.* Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003:5). Specific pieces of data which correspond to the different themes or categories are identified by seeking similarities and differences in the different sets of data and ascertaining what the different groups of participants are saying (*cf.* Newby, 2010:120).

***Step 6 Data interpretation:*** In this step, the data were interpreted by attaching significance to the themes and patterns observed. The goal of this step is to learn from the data by determining the meaning of these themes, categories and patterns. Picciano (2004:14) points out that most analyses in qualitative research happen in the form of words. The research findings are, therefore, finally described and interpreted in a written narrative form (in accordance with the qualitative reporting style) in order to render the narratives meaningful to the readers. In this study the results were discussed and interpreted, conclusions drawn and recommendations made based on the findings from the review of related literature, the field study, and the best practice framework for quality assurance based on literature.

The lessons learnt constitute the data interpretation and this was used to compile the report that details the research findings and, thus, communicates the findings. According to Taylor-Powell and Renner (2003:5), in qualitative work, the writing of the research report is an extension of the data analysis as writing is another way in which to make sense of the data by synthesising and summarising them. Delpont and Fouché (in Bezuidenhout 2005:147) draw a distinction between

qualitative reports and quantitative reports and describe the characteristics of a qualitative report as follows:

- Less structured – it does not conform to the traditional (quantitative) structure of introduction, methods, results and discussion.
- Often longer and more descriptive as compared to quantitative reports – qualitative researchers use more literary writing styles, which increases length.
- More flexible in design as compared to quantitative reports – the design evolves throughout the research process and, in the report, the methodologies are explained in more detail.
- Uses a narrative writing style.
- Uses ample quotations from the data.

Taylor-Powell and Renner (2003:5) suggest that an adequate qualitative research report not only explains, but also persuades with persuasiveness being very much an issue of good, clear writing. The way in which the report is written should help the readers to understand for themselves what the researcher is claiming to find in the data and what he/she is making of the data. The essence is the trustworthiness, reliability and validity of the findings. The next section describes the way in which trustworthiness, reliability and validity were achieved in this study.

#### **4.7 TRUSTWORTHINESS, RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY**

One goal of qualitative research is to enhance the understanding of phenomena. When an individual reports or evaluates qualitative research, it is important to assess the findings in terms of plausibility and believability (Lester 1999:2). Trustworthiness, reliability and validity are the cornerstones of any research. The following questions often arise during research design: Will the research instruments provide the required information? Will the responses given by the participants on a specific day correlate with the responses that may be provided by the same

respondents at a later date? The answers to these questions are linked to the issues of trustworthiness, reliability and validity that are so often questioned by readers. In many cases, this criticism is justifiable. However, a well designed research instrument in a well designed research design will, to a large extent, limit negative criticism in this regard. In this study, the researcher made sure that what he had gathered represented the situation that was intended to be examined and that, if other researchers were to investigate the same phenomenon using the same approach, the results would be the same (*cf.* Newby, 2010:120). This was achieved by ensuring that the approach and the techniques used were appropriate.

#### **4.7.1 Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness in research refers to the validity of the research conducted by the researcher (Van der Merve, 2005:186). Bezuidenhout (2005:192) maintains that it is essential that any inquirer persuade the audience that the findings of a study are worth taking account of. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985:290), the basic question addressed by the notion of trustworthiness is simple: "How may an inquirer persuade his/her audiences that the research findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to?" Groenewald (2004:21) emphasises the truth-value of qualitative research and the ways in which to achieve. In this study, the phenomenological research design contributed towards truth.

The researcher should be able to explain why the reader should "believe" what he/she is reading. According to Van der Merve (2005:186), the results of quantitative studies are measurable, and this, in turn, makes it easier to believe the results. Nevertheless, these results should still be based on valid data. Qualitative studies, on the other hand, rely on data that are verbal and this does not involve any formal measurement. In this study, triangulation, in terms of which

methods of data collection were used, was employed in the data collection to ensure trustworthiness (*cf.* Walsh, 2001:69).

According to Walsh (2001:69), triangulation is used to try to counter any weaknesses that may exist in the various methods of data collection and analysis. In this study, triangulation involved using three methods of data collection, namely, personal interviews, institutional document analyses and focus group discussion, in order to validate the information obtained through using more than one method. This three-methods approach was adopted so as to ensure effective data collection. As regards interviews, the researcher sought to understand the individual experiences of the phenomenon under investigation. When it comes to the institutional document analyses, he sought to use evidence to verify the data that had been collected via the interviews. Finally, as regard the focus group discussion, he sought to verify the information that had been collected via both the interviews and the document analyses as well as seeking inputs into the draft internal quality assurance framework.

#### **4.7.2 Reliability**

According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010:244) and Best and Kahn (2006:294), reliability refers to consistency of measurement – the extent to which results will be similar using different forms of the same instrument, different data collection occasions or the extent to which the measurements are free of error. In qualitative studies, reliability refers to the notion that one question should have the same meaning for different respondents (Clark, 1999:6). Such an approach, however, makes it more difficult to establish reliability as well as contributing to the challenges of interpretation that are central to the qualitative approach. In addition, such an approach also places considerable emphasis on the validity of a study.

In this phenomenological study, it was assumed that no two interview encounters would ever be the same. In other words, even if the same interviewer were to ask the same questions to the same respondent on another day, the answers may be slightly different depending on contextual factors such as contact with other people or experiences that may shape an interviewee's views. However, this is not to say that there is no baseline for examining whether or not a statement is a reliable representation of a person's views or a trustworthy account of their experiences; it is simply recognising that it is essential that all such self reports be understood as being constructed within a specific context and for a particular audience (Groenewald, 2004:13).

#### **4.7.3 Validity**

Validity in qualitative research refers to the degree to which the explanations of phenomena match the realities of the world. In other words, it is the degree to which the interpretations and concepts have mutual meanings as regards the participants and the researcher (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:409). McMillan and Schumacher (2010:409) claim that validity in qualitative research depends on the data collection and analysis techniques. This study used triangulation in the data collection as a technique with which to enhance the validity of the study. In terms of the triangulation interviews, institutional document analyses, and focus group discussions were used to obtain information about the same phenomenon from three different sources (Newby, 2010:122).

In qualitative approaches, the validity of a study is not determined with reference either to scientific methods or to a study's replicability, but on the way in which a given interpretation may be judged. Is it thorough, coherent, and comprehensive? Does it make sense, or ring truth? Is it useful? In particular, is the interpretation provocative and generative of further inquiry? If a study meets these criteria, it may be said to be valid. In order to ensure validity, this qualitative

study took into account the context of those who were the subject of the inquiry – the participants – and offered a promising analysis of why and how the phenomenon had occurred, thus making the narratives meaningful for the readers (Clark, 1999:6).

#### **4.8 ETHICS**

Ethics generally are concerned with beliefs about what is right or wrong from a moral perspective. Research ethics, on the other hand, are focused on what is morally proper or improper when engaging with the research participants or when accessing archival data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:117). In view of the fact that this study deals with human beings, it was necessary to consider the ethical and legal responsibilities involved in conducting research on human subjects. Ethical research standards were upheld by maintaining a high level of privacy, confidentiality in handling information and informed consent with the privacy of research participants being protected by all possible means. This, in turn, implied that access to the participants' characteristics, responses, behaviour, and other information was restricted solely to the researcher (*cf.* McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:117).

Where required, anonymity was ensured and the responses were treated with a high level of confidentiality (*cf.* Groenewald, 2004:20). Confidentiality means that no one has access either to individual data or to the names of participants except the researcher and may be assured by making certain that it is not possible to link the data to individual participants by names. Accordingly, in this study code numbers were used to distinguish the responses of participants from those of other participants while the names, addresses, and other identifying information related to the participants was not directly associated with any of the information obtained from them. A master list of the individuals participating in the study and their identifying information

was kept in a secure location and, when the results of the study were written down, the names of the participants and other identifying information were not used.

Informed consent was gained in advance by obtaining permission from the heads of the institutions selected to carry out the research at their respective institutions. The respondents were informed of the nature and purpose of the study, that participation was voluntary and that they were free to opt to terminate or withdraw at any point during the research process. Those individuals who did participate signed a consent form to indicate their willingness to participate (see Appendix D).

Based on suggestions of Groenewald (2004:10), the researcher devised a specific informed consent agreement with which to gain the informed consent of the participants. This consent agreement contained the following items:

- That they were participating in research
- The purpose of the research (without stating the central research question)
- The procedures involved in the research
- The risks and benefits of the research
- The voluntary nature of research participation
- The subject's (informant's) right to withdraw from the study at any time
- The procedures adopted to protect confidentiality

#### **4.9 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

The aim of this chapter was to provide clarity about the approach, design and methodology that were used in this study. Accordingly, it dealt specifically with the research design and the

methodologies used to collect and analyse the data, as well as accounting for the choice of these methods in preference to others. The application of a qualitative research approach and a phenomenological research design, and the utilisation of an interview schedule, document analysis checklist and focus group discussion guide as instruments for data collection, was examined in detail. The study took place in three major phases. In phase 1, the researcher used individual interviews to collect data. In phase 2, the researcher drafted a preliminary framework for quality assurance. In phase 3, the researcher conducted a focus group interview with experts to discuss the preliminary results of the study and to validate the draft framework.

Qualitative research based on improvement-oriented evaluation was found to be the most appropriate to this study. Firstly, qualitative research is a “nothing to something” situation where the aim of the evaluation is to provide findings to aid decision-making about a new programme. Secondly, there were pre-existing quality assurance mechanisms in place in HEIs, but these required a major review. Accordingly, the outcome improvement-oriented evaluation provided information with which to assist decision making about the status of quality assurance in the respective HEIs in Namibia. There is, therefore, a likelihood that this study may either bring about radical changes in those existing quality assurance mechanisms in HEIs in Namibia that were perceived either to be out of step or not serving their intended purpose or even effect their replacement by new and more appropriate quality assurance mechanisms.

The next chapter will analyse, interpret and discuss the empirical data emanating from the study.

## CHAPTER 5

### DATA ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

*It is crucial that universities, which are ostensibly concerned with excellence and which have enjoyed traditional autonomy on that basis, are currently facing quality assurance demands which, by their nature, call into question the capacity of the university sector to deliver quality outcomes (Harker in Rosa & Amaral, s.a.:1).*

#### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

The rise in the demand for internal quality assurance processes is usually linked to the massification of higher education, to the increase of investment in higher education and doubts concerning the possibility of maintaining quality in the resultant new circumstances, as well as to the belief in the importance of higher education in the new knowledge society (EAU, 2010:12). The aim of this study was to identify internal quality assurance mechanisms in place in HEIs in Namibia, paying particular interest to how, and through which activities, these institutions are responding to the challenge of assuring and enhancing the quality of the higher education they are providing. Accordingly the study focused on the mechanisms implemented by institutions to enhance their internal quality and to improve their accountability, and in this way, to embed a quality culture shared by all members of the HEIs community in order to realise true high quality education. A further aim of the study was, thus, to make recommendations, based on the framework developed, aimed at the improvement of the practice of quality assurance in HEIs in Namibia.

Marshall and Rossman (2006:23) suggest that qualitative methods are well suited to exploratory or descriptive research that emphasises the importance of context and setting as well as the

deeper understanding of the participants' experiences with the phenomena in question. Accordingly, qualitative inquiry methods were used for this study. A phenomenological explorative and descriptive design was used with the aim of seeking both an understanding and an interpretation of the meaning that the participants ascribe to their experience of the phenomenon under investigation. Three HEIs participated in the study. Selection criteria included such considerations as degree-granting institutions. In order to realise the aims of the study, semi-structured interviews, an institutional document analysis and a focus group discussion were employed to generate the required data. These multiple methods were used to collect data as a way of triangulation so as to ensure the credibility of the data. Participants who were experienced in the field of quality assurance in HEIs and who were either directly or indirectly responsible for the quality assurance within their respective institutions were selected by employing the purposive sampling technique to "select unique cases that are especially informative" (Neuman, 2000:198).

The main aim of data analysis and data interpretation is to organise the data into categories and to identify patterns in these categories through an inductive process, that is, reasoning from the particular to the general (*cf.* Bezuidenhout, 2005:176). This chapter (chapter 5) describes the analysis and interpretation of the data, and discusses the empirical findings of this study which emanated from the data obtained by means of the individual interviews, institutional document analyses and focus group discussion.

## **5.2 DATA ANALYSIS**

Merriam (2001:178) describes data analysis as the process of meaning making – "consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read." According to Taylor-Powell and Renner (2003:6), qualitative data analysis is a broad and

complex, multidimensional subject. Qualitative research results in large amounts of contextually laden, subjective, and richly detailed data. This data usually originate from interview transcripts or observation notes and must be pared down to represent major themes or categories that describe the phenomenon being studied. Data reduction facilitates communicating the findings in a simple and efficient way. This paring and sieving of data is often termed *thematic analysis* (Gearing, 2004:19).

In this study, the data analysis comprised an inductive process (the inference of a general conclusion from various instances), which involved organising or classifying the data into categories, and then identifying patterns in these categories (*cf.* Bezuidenhout, 2005:178). Throughout this process of data analysis a continuous and conscious attempt was made not to allow personal bias, assumptions or presuppositions to contaminate the participants' meanings and opinions. The researcher identified areas of potential bias and "bracketed" them so that their influences on the research process were minimal (*cf.* Groenewald, 2004:6; Gearing, 2004:20).

Mention was made in section 4.6.1 of the fact that analysing qualitative data involves reading through the interview or focus group transcripts and other data, developing codes, coding the data, and then making connections between the discrete pieces of data. This study adopted a *content analysis* approach to the qualitative data, as suggested by Lacey and Luff (2001:15). This content analysis approach involves five steps that were depicted in figure 4.1, namely, familiarisation of the data, data transcription, data organisation, coding (categorising the data), and data interpretation.

This section presents an analysis of the data which involved identifying patterns within and between categories, as was suggested in section 4.6.1.

The themes, categories and patterns that emerged during the data analysis are summarised in Table 5.1.

**Table 5.1: Themes, categories and patterns as identified in the analysis of the data collected by means of individual interviews, institutional document analysis and the focus group discussion**

Themes	Categories	Patterns
<p><b>Theme 1</b> Quality concept as understood within HEIs</p>	<p>Quality of the student experience of the teaching and learning</p> <p>Quality of the staff input into the teaching and learning</p> <p>Quality of the mechanisms/processes in place to assure the quality of the teaching and learning</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Actively engaged students in learning</li> <li>• Graduates finding employment</li> <li>• On-going commitment to learning</li> <li>• Applicability of knowledge to solving real life problems</li> <li>• Students develop skills that allow them to think independently</li> <li>• Students performing well</li> <li>• Fruitfulness of knowledge in personal and social domains</li> <li>• Enthusiastic students</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commitment to learning</li> <li>• Enthusiastic staff</li> <li>• Academics possess sound subject matter knowledge</li> <li>• Effectiveness in transmitting knowledge and skills</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assessment that focuses on students' attainment of learning outcomes</li> <li>• Availability of teaching and learning</li> <li>• Continuous professional development of academic staff</li> <li>• High academic standards</li> <li>• Reduced obstacles to learning</li> <li>• Relevant curricula</li> <li>• Strong link between HEIs and industry, professional bodies and community</li> <li>• The authenticity, content, coverage and depth of information</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wide range of student assessment methods</li> </ul>
<b>Theme 2</b> Quality assurance concept as understood within HEIs	More appropriate definitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Having mechanisms in place to ensure excellence and high academic standards</li> <li>• Efforts being made to achieve and maintain quality</li> <li>• Systems in place to ensure excellence in teaching and research</li> <li>• Procedures in place to ensure achievement of the standards set</li> </ul>
	Less appropriate definitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quality control</li> </ul>
<b>Theme 3</b> Difference between quality and quality assurance, as understood within HEIs	Quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is being produced and maintained</li> <li>• Nominal aspirations reflected in the vision and mission of the institution</li> <li>• Producing employable graduates</li> </ul>
	Quality assurance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Methods for maintaining and monitoring quality</li> <li>• Procedures in place to ensure quality</li> </ul>
<b>Theme 4</b> Introduction of quality assurance systems within HEIs	Positive remarks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• QA formalised between 2007 - 2009</li> <li>• NCHE system introduced in 2009</li> <li>• Systematic quality assurance mechanisms in HEIs are recent</li> <li>• Introduced in response to national requirements set by NQA and NCHE</li> <li>• International best practices</li> <li>• Through networking</li> <li>• Dissemination of good practice</li> <li>• The concept is the result of consultations with various stakeholders</li> <li>• The concept is based on the requirements of the national QA system</li> <li>• Institutional leadership decided on the concept</li> <li>• Through workshops organised by QA office</li> <li>• QA is new and efforts are still ongoing</li> <li>• Inter-institutional cooperation, mutual assistance and benchmarking</li> <li>• Formalised AQ system is in initial stage</li> </ul>

	Concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not all HEIs have implemented systematic quality assurance mechanisms, as yet</li> <li>• There was no proper consultation</li> </ul>
<b>Theme 5</b> Purpose of QA within HEIs	<p>Improvement-oriented purposes</p> <p>Compliance-oriented purposes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For improvement</li> <li>• To ensure excellence</li> <li>• To ensure high academic standards</li> <li>• To improve public image</li> <li>• To improve international ranking</li> <li>• To improve public confidence in HEIs</li> <li>• For accountability</li> <li>• To conform to national and international standards</li> <li>• For compliance with external regulations</li> <li>• New government requirements for quality assurance</li> <li>• NQA and NCHE expectations/regulatory requirements</li> <li>• For quality control</li> </ul>
<b>Theme 6</b> Scope of QA within HEIs	<p>Quality of educational processes</p> <p>Quality of support services</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Based on institution's own mission, vision, goals and objectives</li> <li>• Student assessment (internal and external moderation)</li> <li>• Annual appraisal of academic staff</li> <li>• Curriculum development</li> <li>• Core functions of teaching and learning, research and community engagement</li> <li>• Library services</li> <li>• Research activities</li> <li>• Staff recruitment</li> <li>• Student admission</li> <li>• Support services</li> </ul>
<b>Theme 7</b> Structures supporting the internal quality assurance processes	<p>Positive remarks</p> <p>Concerns</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• QA office</li> <li>• QA representatives in faculties and departments</li> <li>• QA committee</li> <li>• QA policy</li> <li>• No systematic QA, as yet</li> <li>• QA is based on <i>ad hoc</i> processes</li> <li>• Bureaucratic structure</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Top-down approach to QA</li> </ul>
<b>Theme 8</b> Tools and processes for assessing quality within HEIs	More favourable remarks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluation of implementation of strategic plan</li> <li>• Regular curriculum reviews</li> <li>• Student feedback</li> <li>• Institutional information office</li> <li>• Quarterly reports</li> <li>• Annual reports</li> </ul>
	Less favourable remarks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No formal monitoring and evaluation mechanisms</li> <li>• No formal mechanisms for monitoring of implementation of QA</li> </ul>
<b>Theme 9</b> Role of senior management in QA within HEIs	Positive remarks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Senior leadership is the decision maker in the whole process</li> <li>• Senior management creates conducive environment for effective implementation of QA propositions</li> <li>• Senior management takes the lead in the whole process</li> <li>• Senior management evaluates the effectiveness of the implementation of QA system</li> <li>• Senior management delegates QA responsibilities</li> </ul>
	Concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• QA based on top-down approach</li> <li>• Too bureaucratic</li> <li>• Lack of decentralisation</li> <li>• Lack of academic leadership</li> </ul>

<b>Theme 10</b> Mechanisms for internal QA	QA mechanisms for teaching and learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• External examiners system</li> <li>• Stakeholder involvement in curriculum development process</li> <li>• Student evaluation of lectures and courses</li> <li>• Curriculum reviews</li> <li>• Recruitment of qualified and experienced staff</li> <li>• Annual staff appraisals</li> <li>• Accreditation by professional bodies</li> <li>• Programme development and review in line with NQA expectations</li> <li>• Approval carried out through various structures up to Senate</li> </ul>
	QA mechanisms for research activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appointment of qualified academic staff with research experience</li> <li>• Regular workshops and training</li> <li>• Seminars</li> <li>• Annual staff appraisals</li> <li>• Workload</li> </ul>
	QA mechanisms for both academic and support services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff appraisal used for promotion</li> <li>• Staff appraisals</li> <li>• Annual staff appraisals</li> </ul>
<b>Theme 11</b> Stakeholder involvement in internal QA processes	Stakeholders internal to HEIs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student representatives on various structures and committees</li> </ul>
	Stakeholders external to HEIs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Industry involvement in curriculum development and reviews</li> <li>• Consultations with NQA and NCHE</li> <li>• Consultations with professional bodies</li> </ul>



	Concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quality culture needs to be strengthened</li> <li>• Strategy, policy and planning</li> <li>• There should be commitment on the part of senior leadership</li> <li>• There should be performance indicators such as qualitative and quantitative measures of quality</li> <li>• Develop performance indicators</li> <li>• Promote benchmarking activities</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• None</li> </ul>
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**5.2.1 Discussion and interpretation**

The data were analysed using the thematic analysis approach. Recommendations from the literature on qualitative data analysis guided the data analysis in this study (*cf.* Lacey & Luff, 2001:15). The findings from the individual interviews and institutional document analyses identified the practices of quality assurance in HEIs in Namibia. These findings were clustered into the *fourteen* themes. This section presents and discusses the interpretation of the data which aimed at making meaning out of the themes, categories and patterns identified during the data analysis (*cf.* Merriam, 2001:178).

**Theme 1: Quality concept as understood within HEIs**

The literature review indicated that successful implementation of systematic quality assurance depends on a common understanding of the concept of quality and its characteristics within HEIs. According to the EUA (2010:18), "An institution, having clearly defined its mission and strategic goals and knowing what quality means in the light of its own goals, lays the groundwork for a well-functioning quality assurance system". The participants were asked to mention any characteristics of quality, as understood within their respective institutions. Through the spoken

word, various understandings of quality concept were brought to the researcher's attention as presented in Appendix E, 1. It was of interest to learn that there appears to be a lack of a formal definition of quality available to all the participating institutions as the participants merely dwelt on their general understanding of what they think quality is and, in most cases, they referred to the dictionary meaning of the word. None of the participants alluded to the formal definitions of quality such as *fitness for purpose, fitness of purpose, value for money, transformation, etc.*, as suggested in the literature (Harvey & Green, 1993:11). The consensus from the individual interviews, however, indicated that there are characteristics of quality that focus on the quality of the student experience of the teaching and learning, the quality of the staff input into the teaching and learning, and quality of the processes put in place to assure the quality of teaching and learning.

## **Theme 2: Quality assurance concept as understood within HEIs**

Fresen (2005:26) points out that, just like quality concept, quality assurance has different meanings to different stakeholders, institutions, even individuals within institutions. Taking note of the foregoing, the researcher was interested to learn from participants about how they conceptualise quality assurance within their HEIs. Again, as can be seen in Table 5.1, Theme 2 as well as Appendix E, 1, it emanated from the interactions with the participants during the interviews that there is no formal definition for quality assurance available to all the participating institutions and it was inferred from the responses that the respondents were dwelling on their traditional conceptions of quality assurance. In essence, there is a general lack of knowledge with regard to what quality assurance is and what it entails in modern HEIs. Even in those institutions that have established quality assurance offices, there appeared to be little clarity regarding the way in which quality assurance is defined, measured, secured and enhanced. Definitions such as the one provided by Vlăsceanu *et al.* (2007:74), which refers to quality assurance as an "all-embracing term referring to an ongoing, continuous process of evaluating

(assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining, and improving) the quality of a higher education system, institutions, or programmes”, were not discernible in the responses of the participants. However, higher education institutions could adopt this and other similar definitions to ensure a common understanding of what quality assurance entails.

It may be inferred from the above discussions that it was not possible to identify any formal definitions for either quality or quality assurance in use in the participating institutions and, indeed, there is very little agreement on notions of quality and quality assurance in HEIs, even among the different constituencies within these institutions. In general, most of the participants did not appear to have a well grounded understanding of the concepts of quality and quality assurance, or of the relationship between the two, and informed by the academic literature as most of them referred to dictionary definitions and/or provided vague definitions. It would, thus, seem that the traditional notions of quality (equating quality to high standards) and quality assurance are still dominant in most HEIs in Namibia. Quality assurance experts argue that it is not possible to define, plan and implement quality assurance properly if those people who are responsible for doing this do not have a proper understanding of what either quality or quality assurance entails, or of the way in which the two concepts are related to each other (*cf.* Maharasoa *et al.*, 2001:xxxvii).

### **Theme 3: Difference between quality and quality assurance, as understood within HEIs**

It is important to emphasise the relationship between quality and quality assurance, to have clarity about the purpose of internal quality assurance and to separate that from approach, focus and methods (*cf.* Kristensen, 2008:9). In his discussions with participants drawn from across the institutions that participated in the study, the researcher found it interesting to obtain a clear picture of how participants made a distinction between quality and quality assurance. The

participants were asked to distinguish between quality and quality assurance. From the documentation made available to assist his deliberations and from the interviews with various groups drawn across the institutions, as depicted in table 5.1, it was evident that the participants were aware of the difference between quality and quality assurance. Regarding the foregoing, the researcher, however, noted the challenge facing the institutions with regard to formalising the definitions for quality and quality assurance as participants did not use any formal definitions of quality and quality assurance, as identified in the literature, to provide a clear-cut distinction between the two concepts. Whereas quality assurance is a process which is tangible and manageable by institutional decisions, quality is the outcome of this process.

#### **Theme 4: Introduction of quality assurance systems within HEIs**

The literature review revealed that the majority of HEIs in most countries in the world have introduced systematic mechanisms for quality assurance in response to a set of pressures which include the growing importance of knowledge led economies that have placed higher education at the centre of national competitiveness agendas, and the rise in participation rates that has led to changes in the shape and size of many higher education systems (EUA, 2011:17). In line with this, these institutions have established central units to support the implementation of internal quality assurance systems (EUA, 2010:20). The researcher was interested to learn of the stage of development with regard to the introduction of quality assurance systems within the institutions that participated in the study. It was clear that all institutions are interested in the quality of the education they offer. This was evident from the data from this study, which demonstrated that remarkable progress has been made in quality assurance in recent years. Most of the responding HEIs did have fundamental policies, structures and processes in place in this regard, although institutions tend not to identify all quality assurance practices in place in a systematic way. Table 5.1, theme 4 as well as Appendix E, 6 demonstrate that HEIs have a large variety of organisational structures in place to support the implementation of quality assurance

processes; however, no typical solution on how to arrange the responsibilities for quality assurance within a HEI seems to exist.

These findings from the data analysis have shown that most of the institutions did have the main structures and processes in place to support the implementation of quality assurance processes, particularly with regard to teaching and learning, research and community service/engagement activities. In terms of a quality assurance policy and associated procedures, most HEIs have these strategic documents in place, although the implementation of quality assurance policy and procedures may not be satisfactory in all cases. This positive development should be further encouraged.

It is, however, worth noting that, despite the fact that progress has been made with the introduction of quality assurance in certain of the institutions, such developments are extremely recent in the Namibian higher education landscape as no higher education institution had such a system in place before 2007. One of the institutions in the study had introduced these processes in 2007 and the other one in 2009.

Most of the institutions have been building, through inter-institutional cooperation, mutual assistance and benchmarking, their quality culture and internal quality assurance systems. As seen in the responses depicted in table 5.1, quality assurance has been introduced in HEIs in Namibia in various ways. In some instances, it was an initiative on the part of institutional management and, in other instances, it was introduced in response to the expectations of external quality assurance agencies. The literature review noted that, whether the implementation of internal quality assurance is internally or externally triggered, quality assurance is a fundamental responsibility of any higher education institution, be it public or private, through the establishment of strong internal quality assurance systems, while strong national external

quality assurance frameworks or similar systems are essential if benchmarked quality standards are to be maintained (IUCEA, 2008c:9).

The findings of this study also revealed, however, that not all HEIs have yet implemented systematic quality assurance mechanisms. One of the institutions is still in the process of planning or considering implementing systematic quality assurance systems.

The study argues that quality assurance systems in most of the institutions are largely in place, although they are very recent and at different stages of development and implementation. The fact that systematic quality assurance processes are recent phenomena in higher education in Namibia confirms the claim in the literature that, apart from unpublished official documents, there is little information available on empirical literature on quality assurance in higher education in Namibia.

### **Theme 5: Purpose of quality assurance within HEIs**

The best practices identified in the literature revealed that it is important that HEIs be clear about the purpose of internal quality assurance. For example, to what extent is it a process for control, accountability or compliance? If it is a tool to ensure compliance, then there needs to be a transparent compliance audit process. If it is about accountability, then there needs to be clear statements of who is responsible for what and also associated and transparent procedures in place for checking accountability (Kristensen, 2008:12).

As has been revealed by the literature review, the two key purposes of quality assurance in higher education are *accountability* and *continuous improvement*. The literature furthermore revealed that attempts to achieve these two purposes differ from country to country and institution to institution because quality assurance is context bound. The purposes behind

quality assurance will therefore influence the characteristics of a quality assurance system (Strydom, 2001:3).

A question about the main purpose of the internal quality assurance arrangements within HEIs was posed during the interviews. It may, however, be deduced from the responses that most of the participants are of the opinion that *compliance* is the main purpose of their quality assurance systems. Some of the participants even used the term *quality assurance* interchangeably with *quality control*, a term which is not appropriate in higher education as it denotes a policing role although it may apply in academia in specific contexts when one understands the nature and use of both concepts (Kristensen, 2008:12). It is interesting to note that, when discussing the degree of disagreement within the institutions about the definitions and purposes of quality assurance processes, the views of the various participants were not always accurate. In addition, it was observed that participants were not speaking either with one voice or in a positive manner about the quality assurance processes and, in fact, there was a strong divided opinion about internal quality assurance processes. As can be seen in Table 5.1, Theme 5 as well as Appendix E, 7, there appears to be different views among members of the institutions and it may take some time to reach wide acceptance. Higher education institutions are, therefore, encouraged to use internal quality assurance as a process to ensure *improvement*, rather than compliance and control.

### **Theme 6: Scope of quality assurance within HEIs**

Adams (2008:5) asserts that the scope of quality assurance may vary from institution to institution. The literature review revealed that the most effective internal quality assurance arrangements are those that derive from effective internal decision-making processes and structures. Having clear accountability lines and clarifying responsibilities at all levels ensure that the quality assurance system is kept as simple as possible while closing the feedback loops and this should, if anything, reduce bureaucracy by limiting data collection, and committees to what is

absolutely necessary (EUA, 2011:9). This source points out that it is crucial to fully engage both academic activities and administrative functions within the university's quality assurance procedures and processes. The literature furthermore advises that HEIs should be cautious to make quality assurance processes 'user-friendly' so that they do not become too complex/over-elaborate, and that their central purpose is to show improvement, benefit and impact on the quality of teaching and learning, research and community engagement.

As depicted in figure 5.1, most of the participants focused on the internal quality assurance mechanisms for teaching and learning, student admission, student assessment, curriculum development, library services, and research activities. Some of the respondents, however, pointed out that their institutions' internal quality assurance systems encompassed all institutional operations, including community engagement and support services.

### **Theme 7: Structures supporting the internal quality assurance processes**

Kristensen (2008:23) argues that there is no requirement that one person should have overall responsibility for quality. In theory, quality is the responsibility of everyone within the institution. Nevertheless, someone in a senior position who may speak for the institution on quality issues is useful. The person with overall responsibility should, however, not be dictatorial, but should rather encourage bottom-up developments. It helps to have a co-ordinated system of internal quality assurance that is applied consistently throughout the institution, while recognising both variations as regards the disciplines as well as the different external demands placed on different disciplines. A single system ensures equity, imposes the same level of expectations and action on all discipline areas, and allows for cross-disciplinary dialogue and the sharing of good practice. A single system should, however, avoid becoming a burdensome bureaucracy in its own right.

The best practices in quality assurance provide that successful quality assurance systems are supported by dedicated structures (Brennan & Shah, 2000b:71). Institutions that have formalised their quality assurance systems indicated that they have quality assurance policies in place supported by organisational structures to support the implementation of the quality assurance processes. These structures range from centralised quality assurance offices with specialised staff to institutional level quality assurance committees. Nevertheless, the structures supporting the implementation of internal quality assurance are still under development in all Namibian institutions.

Institutions that have not yet formalised quality assurance, however, reported that no formal structures were in place and that quality assurance is carried out on an *ad hoc* basis. Some of the respondents also reported that quality assurance in their institutions take a bureaucratic stance with a top-down approach to quality assurance.

### **Theme 8: Tools and processes for assessing quality within HEIs**

The literature review pointed out that it is important for HEIs not to rely on a single quality assurance instrument, such as student questionnaires. There must be a mix of several instruments to ensure effective quality assurance systems (EUA, 2011:9). As can be seen in Table 5.1, Theme 8, the higher education institutions reported having various tools and processes for assessing quality. These included the evaluation of the implementation of the strategic plan, curriculum reviews, student information, annual reporting, and student evaluation of lectures and courses. However, it would appear that the link between collecting feedback and informing those involved in this feedback collection (students and staff) is not clear. Those students who provide feedback through lecturer evaluation questionnaires, for instance, reported that they were not informed about either the results or about the follow up actions in the HEIs that participated in the study.

The general lack of a “feedback loop” was noted in all areas of the internal quality assurance of the institutions that participated in the study as there was little mention of cyclical self-assessment as a mechanism for quality assurance. The need to implement regular self-assessment in order to close the “feedback loop” and to provide feedback on all aspects of institutional operation was, thus, also identified. In addition, the findings from the data analysis also indicated that the participating institutions had not reported that they had defined key performance indicators with which to monitor progress in their execution of activities. It would, thus, appear that the development of key performance indicators is an area that, potentially, warrants further development.

### **Theme 9: Role of senior management in quality assurance within HEIs**

The literature review revealed that one of the first steps for an institution to develop an effective and successful quality assurance system is for institutional leadership to demonstrate an institutional commitment to quality and to take the lead in the process (Kristensen, 2008:13). In this study, the researcher was interested to learn from the participants about the role of institutional leadership in quality assurance processes within their institutions. It appears from the deliberations on this matter that most HEIs appear to have recognised the crucial role played by institutional leadership in demonstrating commitment to quality and, thus, their senior leadership is involved, in one way or another, in the quality assurance processes in the majority of these HEIs. It may be deduced from the responses recorded in Table 5.1 that the participating HEIs are succeeding in this area as it was generally agreed that senior management does, indeed, have a crucial role to play in the effective implementation of internal quality assurance systems. Higher education institutions are, therefore, encouraged to continue ensuring that senior management take the lead in quality assurance in order to enhance the credibility of the top-down approach (*cf.* Kristensen, 2008:9).

## **Theme 10: Mechanisms for internal quality assurance**

Most of the quality assurance activities which emerged from the data analysis were those related to the traditional understanding of quality assurance, including the use of external examiners in assessment, student evaluation of lectures at the end of their course, and stakeholder involvement in curriculum development process (Table 5.1). It is, however, possible to deduce from these interventions that the participating institutions did not have in place fully fledged internal mechanisms for the monitoring and evaluation of the learning facilitation activities with reference to international best practices and for ensuring that the findings from monitoring and evaluation, as well as benchmarking practices, were used to improve learning facilitation activities on an on-going basis, as suggested by the best practices in the quality assurance identified in the literature (NCHE, 2009:16). Self-evaluation, which was identified in the literature as a cornerstone of successful quality assurance, was barely mentioned by any of the participating institutions.

It is essential that higher education institutions recognise the need to have in place comprehensive systems for the management of teaching and learning, with such systems being geared towards ensuring the quality of the academic outcomes and enhancing student success. According to SARUA (2009:24), "the days of academic staff 'lecturing' to students on a 'take it or leave it' basis are largely over". The increasing demand for accountability, a consciousness of students as customers, and the competition for good students between institutions have meant that greater attention needs to be paid to all aspects of the educational experience. Teaching and learning should, therefore, be accorded the highest priority as regards quality assurance in HEIs in Namibia.

This study has established that much has been done at all the participating institutions with regard to the management of research activities although there is still room for improvement in

this regard. For example, there is a need to establish a more comprehensive research management system that would include strategies, policies and arrangements providing for a shared understanding of the nature, role and goals of research at these institutions. In addition, it is essential that an institution's research be managed within an approved framework of institutional strategies, policies and arrangements to enable the institution to meet its research needs in such a manner that the quality of the research activities may be assured. The link between research and teaching and learning also needs to be strengthened. This implies that the findings of research should inform teaching and learning, and also underpin the development of programmes and courses.

As depicted in table 5.1, Theme 10, namely, the quality assurance of community engagement activities, is an area that still needs to be developed in the HEIs in Namibia. This is evident from the fact that these institutions do not even have policies on community engagement in place. Although there are pockets of community engagement activities being conducted in these institutions, there are, however, no formalised quality assurance systems in place to ensure the quality of these community engagement activities. It may be deduced from these findings that, despite the fact community engagement has been indicated as one of the high priorities in the criteria for institutional audits in the national quality assurance system (NCHE, 2009:19), there is little likelihood that anything will be achieved in this arena until there is a generally acceptable definition of the concept at both institutional and national level.

Although it is highly probable that learning resources and student support services will be in place, all HEIs do not systematically either monitor or evaluate them. In fact, it may be deduced from the findings that very few HEIs in Namibia are prepared, at this point, to have in place fully fledged, functional quality assurance systems based on self-evaluation and operating in all institutional areas at different levels on a cyclical basis. The majority of HEIs do not have clear

plans for quality assurance based on self-evaluation, namely, plans in which purpose, strategic focus areas, criteria, information and resources required, responsibilities, timetables and expectations are detailed as part of a continuous and integrated cyclical process. The role of information technology (IT) and management information system (MIS) is still to be explored as no attempts have been made, as yet, to integrate these elements into institutional QA systems.

As depicted in table 5.1, all the institutions reported that *"periodic programme reviews are undertaken on regular basis"* and, indeed, it would appear that all the institutions seem to be doing well in this area. It emerged from the interactions with the participants during the interviews that mechanisms for programme development are in place but there are, however, no formal mechanisms for the monitoring and evaluation of these programmes to ensure continuous improvement. Regular programme reviews seem to be the most positive aspect of the quality assurance identified in the study. The link between programme review and quality assurance for continuous improvement has, however, not been formally established. Programme review needs to be scrutinised in some depth and mechanisms put in place to align this practice with QA if there is to be continuous improvement.

As seen in table 5.1, it may be deduced that there is still room for improvement as far as the implementation of quality assurance is concerned. However, it may also be deduced from the data that, in general, the participating institutions are still in the awareness phase with regard to institutionalising quality assurance. This is the stage at which individuals, especially key decision-makers, are becoming conscious of the need to improve the quality of higher education and of possibly doing something deliberate and systematic about it. It should be noted that quality assurance is a process and, thus, in view of the fact that the implementation of formalised QA systems is still in its initial stage, it will be some time before its impact is observed (SARUA, 2009:24).

### **Theme 11: Stakeholder involvement in internal quality assurance processes**

As has been often stated in the literature, the participation of staff, students and other relevant stakeholders is one of the key principles in developing both an effective quality assurance system and an institutional quality culture (*cf.* EUA, 2010:19). In all institutions, external stakeholders such as employers, experts, and alumni, etc., are involved in the quality assurance processes, especially in programme development and reviews. All of the participating institutions, furthermore, indicated that they had in place committees responsible for quality assurance and this is commendable. However, despite the fact that these committees were intended to involve all the relevant stakeholders, it was found that student involvement was not widespread. Nevertheless, it emerged from the deliberations during the interviews that institutions face the challenge of intertwined relationships between institutional leadership and management (planning) and quality assurance as these are not well integrated and administered in the planning and management of most of the participating institutions and there is, thus, still room for improvement.

While acknowledging the importance of internal stakeholder relations, the study was also interested in the area of external stakeholder involvement in quality assurance activities. In view of the strategic importance of stakeholder relations as emphasised in the literature (Maharaso *et al.*, 2001:xxxvii), it was evident from the documentary sources and through the spoken word during the interviews with the participants that all higher education institutions that participated in the study did not have formal mechanisms for obtaining feedback from stakeholders as part of internal quality assurance mechanisms. As can be seen in Table 5.1, Theme 11, all the participating institutions indicated that they had not reached the stage of soliciting inputs through surveys with external stakeholders as a form of QA. The only feedback currently practised and found to be common in all the participating institutions was student evaluation of the lecturers at the end of a course.

It may, therefore, be deduced from the findings of this study that, although there has been progress as far as involvement of the relevant stakeholders in quality assurance is concerned, there is still room for improvement in terms of stakeholder contributions to both QA and decision-making process, rather than the stakeholders functioning as a source of information only.

It emerged from the interviews with the participants that external stakeholders, such as employers and experts, are involved in curriculum development and review as members of working groups. Nevertheless, it would appear that their role is more that of information providing rather than decision-making. Stakeholder involvement is, thus, clearly a potential area for improvement in all institutions.

### **Theme 12: The use of institutional information**

According to the ENQA (2005:20), "institutional self-knowledge is the starting point for effective quality assurance". It is, thus, important that HEIs have the means of collecting and analysing information about their own activities. Both the feedback loop and management of an institutional information system are crucial for a well functioning and fully accountable quality assurance system as, without this, institutions will not be aware what is working well, what needs attention or what the results of innovatory practices are (European Commission Tempus, 2009: 41).

This study shows that, while there is a general recognition of the importance of this principle of the use of institutional information, its implementation in HEIs in Namibia is less uniform and would not generally be regarded as being on a par with international best practices. While some institutions do have in place effective information systems for monitoring their activities, there are others which do not have centralised information systems in place as yet. The absence of

effective information systems means that a pillar of the quality assurance requirements is missing.

It emerged from the interactions with the participants during the interviews that HEIs appear to have more information available on the input and on what is offered, than on the output. Finally, while institutions tend to be good at collecting information, the use of this information may still constitute a challenge. As one of the respondents put it, *"Simply collecting information is not sufficient. What happens as a result of the information and how the information is used is more crucial. Will the information make a difference? Will it be analysed and used when decisions about the future are made? If the information demonstrates that there is the need to make changes or improvements, does it lead to concrete measures? And if there is evidence of good performance, will it be rewarded or further disseminated as exemplary?"*

Developing a better and more efficient use of information may, therefore, contribute to more effective strategic planning and strategic management, foster continuous improvement as well as facilitate the involvement of all stakeholders (*cf.* EUA, 2010:17). It is expected that HEIs would have well-defined key performance indicators and internal evaluation processes that would allow them to obtain feedback about their performance. This, however, seems to be a challenge as regards the HEIs in Namibia as the respondents indicated that no attempt has been made to integrate internal evaluation and stakeholder feedback as mechanisms for quality assurance and, in fact, it emerged from the interactions with the participants during the interviews that not one of the participating institutions had, as yet, developed performance indicators associated with follow up mechanisms as they were still working on their quality assurance systems as new phenomena.

### **Theme 13: Challenges for the successful implementation of QA within HEIs**

The literature review revealed that the main quality assurance challenge is to develop the quality assurance systems that are based on 'fit for purpose' approaches (*cf.* EUA, 2010:17). As can be seen in Table 5.1, Theme 13 as well as Appendix E, 25, it became clear during the interactions with the respondents that the process of both enhancing quality and institutionalising quality assurance in the HEIs in Namibia has not been without difficulties and constraints. It was observed in the literature that there has been an urgent need identified for HEIs to develop and implement formal mechanisms for quality assurance. It was also observed that, despite the fact that some institutions have attempted to do so, concrete actions have, thus far, as yet been implemented to address this requirement. This is clear from the fact that there is a lack of coordinated effort in the quality assurance mechanisms in the institutions.

It may be inferred from the participants' responses that the biggest challenge facing HEIs is the resistance from some members of the academic fraternity as a result of misconceptions about what QA may do for the institution. It is important for those who are charged with the responsibility of QA to educate all the members of the institutions in order to dismiss these negative views. It is essential that all these members of the institutions come to realise that quality assurance is all about the continuous improvement of the quality of education and the products thereof, through a systematic process, as regards which openness to comparison with others based on agreed upon benchmark standards, is paramount. Academics need to note that QA promotes the accountability of HEIs to the stakeholders as well as promoting the transparency of the academic systems rather than playing a policing role.

The most significant factors limiting the effective implementation of quality assurance in HEIs in Namibia are inadequate resources, time constraints, and resistance from some academics.

## **Theme 14: Areas for further development**

Several key areas for further development as regards internal quality assurance processes emerged from the study. These include an all-encompassing approach to quality assurance, the development of explicit feedback loops, the participation of all relevant stakeholders, and the use of institutional information to inform decision-making. The data analysis also identified other areas that require further development, including the provision of adequate financial resources to quality assurance activities, the creation of a quality assurance awareness within HEIs, the provision of good governance as a key to the successful implementation of quality assurance systems, basing quality assurance on internal evaluation processes as a means of closing quality loops through feedback, avoiding bureaucratic quality assurance processes by promoting a bottom-up approach alongside a top-down system, the commitment of senior management to quality assurance, and the promotion of a quality culture in terms of which everybody in the institution understands, owns and uses the quality assurance system in day to day activities.

Staff development and training was identified as a fundamental aspect of the implementation and sustainability of quality assurance with the primary responsibility for training and development lying with HEIs.

### **5.2.2 Data analysis and interpretation: focus group discussions**

The fourteen themes identified above were used in compiling the draft framework for best practice in quality assurance in HEIs. The purpose of the focus group was both to ensure triangulation and to provide an opportunity for the focus group panel to comment on the draft framework to enable the researcher to improve on it and make it a working document. The participants were given the focus questions prior to the meeting and many of them discussed these focus questions with their colleagues before attending the focus group discussion, thus

bringing with them well-constructed and broadly representative views. The focus group meeting was held in a local conference centre in November 2010. The main discussion centred on the recommendations contained in the draft framework for best practice in quality assurance in HEIs in Namibia. The following questions triggered the discussions of the focus group session:

- Please critically evaluate the draft framework for best practice in quality assurance in HEIs in Namibia, and make suggestions for any improvements. Pay special attention to possible strengths and areas for improvement in the framework.
- Would the framework be suitable for internal QA in HEIs in Namibia?
- How may the framework be improved to ensure both its suitability and its adequacy?

The feedback that emanated from the focus group discussion was used to improve and finalise the proposed framework. Table 5.2 presents the feedback from the focus group discussions.

**Table 5.2: Feedback from the focus group discussion on the proposed framework for best practice in quality assurance in HEIs in Namibia**

<b>The draft framework for best practice in quality assurance in Namibian HEIs</b>	
<b>Instructions</b>	<b>Participants' inputs</b>
1. Please critically evaluate the draft framework for best practice in quality assurance in HEIs in Namibia, and make suggestions for any improvements. Pay special attention to possible strengths and areas for improvement in the framework.	<p><b>i. Strengths of the framework</b></p> <p>In the category of positive and supportive responses, it was felt that the proposed framework would improve the practice of quality assurance in HEIs in Namibia. <i>"This framework came at the right time when the importance of quality assurance is increasingly being recognised in Namibia and where the importance of use of good practices benchmarking cannot be overemphasised".</i></p> <p><b>ii. Areas for improvement</b></p> <p>There were no major changes suggested with respect to the content of the framework. Most of the comments that were made during the focus group discussions were to do with reworking some of the sentences, grammar and correction of typographic errors to make the document</p>

	error free, unambiguous and user friendly. It was felt that these inputs improved the document.
2. Would the proposed framework be suitable for internal quality assurance in HEIs in Namibia?	The consensus from the focus group discussions indicated that "there is a need to establish a common framework for internal quality assurance, taking cognisance of the fact that individual institutions have to streamline their QA systems according to their unique situations". The proposed framework was, therefore, found to be suitable for use in HEIs in Namibia in providing a blueprint for best practice as regards the promotion of harmonisation and comparability of internal QA practices in the Namibian HEIs.
3. How may the framework be improved to ensure both its suitability and its adequacy?	<p>Within the focus group there was general agreement that the following modifications to the draft would improve the quality of the framework.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The framework needs to be sufficiently generic and non-prescriptive to allow for flexibility and to accommodate the diverse nature of HEIs.</li> <li>• The framework needs to be concise, simple and user friendly.</li> <li>• The framework needs to be aligned to the national quality assurance systems so that the internal and external systems may be viewed together, and the higher education community – the institutions and the agencies – negotiate the articulation between the two processes in order to ensure true accountability, avoid duplication of evaluations and quality assurance fatigue.</li> <li>• It is important to build capacity as regards quality assurance within HEIs to ensure the successful implementation of the QA systems.</li> </ul>

### 5.2.3 Discussion and interpretation: Focus group discussion

Internal quality assurance in the HEIs in Namibia is at its initial stage of development. This study found that all the HEIs in Namibia support the principles of QA, although there is a wide variation in the scope and focus of the QA systems and processes among the institutions. It also emanated from the focus group discussion that the proposed framework is a welcome gesture. This was evident from the comments from the participants – see table 5.2 – to the effect that the framework had come at a time when it was needed the most with institutions in the throes of

implementing their internal quality assurance systems and needing to align them with the best practices in quality assurance. Based on feedback and advice from the focus group the framework was revised and finalised.

### **5.3 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

A closer examination of the various quality assurance mechanisms in place at the three participating HEIs in Namibia showed that most of the existing mechanisms for quality assurance are not in line with modern day expectations of higher education. It was possible to deduce from the interview responses that institutions still rely on traditional methods in their approaches to quality assurance with lecturer evaluation by students and external moderation of examination systems as the only forms of quality assurance practices. There appeared to be little use of mechanisms such as benchmarking, graduate surveys, stakeholder satisfaction surveys and self-evaluation as tools for learning from the best continuous quality improvement.

Formalised quality assurance is still in its infancy stage as most of the participating institutions were still in the initial stage of implementing formalised quality assurance systems while some are still only considering implementing such systems. Formal quality assurance systems based on systematic self-evaluation, operating in all institutional areas at different levels on a cyclical basis, were not observed to be an integral part of the current quality assurance practices observed at these institutions. In addition, there is very little agreement on what quality and quality assurance in higher education entail and it would appear that the traditional notion of equating quality to high standards is still dominant in most HEIs in Namibia. This does not, however, imply that these traditional and existing mechanisms for quality assurance are to be discarded and, in fact, many of the time tested procedures would still be useful, particularly if aligned with modern

day expectations of higher education, which entail formalised and systematic mechanisms for quality assurance.

The majority of HEIs do not have in place clear plans for quality assurance based on self-evaluation in terms of which the purpose, strategic focus area, criteria, information and resources required, responsibilities, timetables and expectations are clearly detailed. It is not possible to ordain quality in teaching, research and services as it has, rather, to be cultivated through consciously planned and on-going efforts involving assurance, assessment and audit.

While one should be mindful of the striving for academic freedom and administrative flexibility on the part of the faculty members and students in HEIs, it is also important to ensure that the public and private funding of higher education is judiciously utilised for results in line with the missions, visions, values and objectives of the institutions. It is, thus, essential that systematic quality assurance processes and mechanisms be drawn up and deployed in a serious manner.

Despite the fact that there have been attempts made by some of the institutions both to enhance quality and to institutionalise quality assurance, it is accurate to say that the impact of these efforts will not be felt for a few years to come as these deliberations are still in their initial stage of development and experience has shown that quality assurance is a process and it takes time before its impact is observed.

The study reaffirmed that a framework for best practices in HEIs in Namibia which aims at improving the current practice was necessary. It is on this premise that such a framework, highlighting best practice in quality assurance, was developed and recommended. It is hoped that this framework will bring about the envisaged improvement in the current quality assurance practice in Namibian higher education system.

The next chapter (chapter 6) presents the summary, recommendations and conclusions resulting from the findings of this study as well as the proposed framework for best practice in quality assurance in Namibian HEIs as an outcome of this study (Annexure A).

## CHAPTER 6

### SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

*The real challenge is to build quality into every stage of our work so that the impact on working lives is spread more evenly than can sometimes be the case at present. There is always the need to reflect on the common complaint from academic staff that we are killing the geese that lay the golden eggs, and whether new quality assurance processes duplicate existing processes and add to workloads rather than adding value to the student experience or detracting from it by using up scarce staff time (EUA, 2010:38).*

#### 6.1 INTRODUCTION

The primary commitment of every educational institution is to 'quality' or 'excellence'. Quality embraces all functions and activities, such as, quality of teaching and learning, research, community engagement, governance and management, support services, to mention just a few (Fresen, 2005:18). The literature review revealed that, across the world, quality assurance has become an increasingly dominant theme in higher education in recent years, with international processes playing an important role in the way in which quality assurance is interpreted and implemented (European Commission Tempus, 2009:7). Internal quality assurance processes are recognised as essential components of institutional autonomy, responsibility and accountability (EAU, 2011:6). This study aimed to examine the internal quality assurance mechanisms in place in HEIs in Namibia as well as to disseminate good practices in the field.

The following includes the summary, recommendations and conclusions which emanated from the findings of this study.

## 6.2 SUMMARY

In the introductory chapter to this study it was mentioned that there has been a worldwide movement towards quality assurance as part of higher education reform (Fresen, 2005:18). It was also mentioned that massification, internalisation and globalisation of higher education are among the principal developments exerting significant pressure on HEIs to offer *access* to higher education to the increasing numbers of students as the demand for higher education soars (Jonathan, 2000:45). This rapid expansion of higher education opportunities together with the exponential growth of private HEIs and different modes of study, such as distance education and online education, all posed a threat to the quality of higher education in general. This, in turn, gave momentum to the development of quality assurance in higher education throughout the world from the 1980s. Systematic internal quality assurance mechanisms are, thus, no longer optional but rather a requirement, if HEIs wish to ensure high academic standards, integrity and accountability and, subsequently, enhance their global competitiveness. Accordingly, most of the HEIs worldwide have now put in place formal and deliberate mechanisms for quality assurance to ensure high academic standards, integrity and accountability (Becket & Brookes, 2005:1).

This study explored the way in which HEIs in Namibia implement internal quality assurance and, based on the findings, suggested a framework for best practice in quality assurance in HEIs in Namibia aimed at the improvement of the practice of quality assurance in higher education in Namibia.

The study was led by two key research questions, namely:

***What are the internal quality assurance mechanisms in place within HEIs in Namibia?***

***What may be said about the implementation stage of these, and are there areas for possible improvement?***

The sub-questions were as follows:

- What is the conceptual framework for quality assurance within the context of higher education in Namibia?
- What kind of examples may be showcased from the literature to demonstrate either best practices in quality assurance or the challenges confronting the implementation of quality assurance?
- What are the key requirements for effective internal quality assurance mechanisms, which may ensure best practice in HEIs in Namibia?
- How are the HEIs in Namibia implementing quality assurance?
- What formal internal quality assurance mechanisms may be identified in the public and private HEIs in Namibia and how fully deployed are these mechanisms?
- What processes do these institutions have in place to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of these mechanisms?
- What are these institutions' priorities as regards improvement?

This was a qualitative research study which employed a phenomenological approach, aimed at seeking an understanding and interpretation of the true meaning that the participants ascribed to their experience of the phenomenon under investigation, that is, quality assurance in HEIs.

Three HEIs in Namibia participated in the study. The participants from the participating institutions were purposefully selected on the basis of the fact that they were information rich about the phenomenon under study as a result of their direct or indirect responsibilities for quality assurance within their respective institutions. The research questions were interrogated through individual interviews, institutional document analyses and the focus group discussion. This multiple method of data collection was used as a form of triangulation.

The study revealed, among other things, that the overall picture is that the new paradigm for quality assurance systems in higher education in Namibia, in its current format, at both national and institutional level, is a very recent phenomenon as it is in the initial stage of development. It was evident from the deliberations and enquiries on the understanding of quality and quality assurance that levels of understanding and awareness among participants of the quality assurance systems were variable, that the pace of change was uneven among the institutions, and that the process of implementation was still in its very early stages.

The NCHES national quality assurance system for higher education in Namibia, with programme accreditation and institutional audit sub-systems, was only introduced in 2009 and its full implementation is yet to be observed. Certain institutions took the initiative to introduce formalised quality assurance systems before 2009. It was evident from the findings that there is a variety of quality assurance developments but, as of yet, no systematic approaches to internal quality assurance. Mechanisms and procedures for self-evaluation have, for example, not been part of the quality assurance practices of HEIs. Several authors identified benchmarking as one of the mechanisms for quality assurance (Kempner, 1993:4, Alstete, 1996:29, Stella & Woodhouse, 2007:45, Filippakou & Tapper, 2008:34). The documentation provided and discussions with participants, however, proved that no attention has ever been given to benchmarking as one of the quality assurance mechanisms which identifies the best practices from which to learn for the purposes of improvement. From his enquiries the researcher learned that several mechanisms were informal and, thus, attention needs to be given to more structured mechanisms. Overall, there is growing awareness of internal quality assurance in the HEIs in Namibia. There is, however, very little agreement on notions of quality and quality assurance in HEIs in Namibia. The concept of quality assurance and the involvement of key stakeholders, such as students and employers, tend to be limited and, in the case of employers, is, in fact, relatively

rare. Particularly, students made it clear during interviews that they would appreciate and value more information on and better engagement with quality assurance processes and arrangements.

The study focused some of its enquiries on matters relating to the promotion of the quality culture within the institutions that participated in the study. This was in line with the (OECD, 2008:312), which maintains that a strong quality culture in HEIs which is shared by the academic leadership, staff and students helps to reinforce the effectiveness of a quality assurance system. Despite the importance of the promotion of a quality culture in ensuring effective quality assurance systems, the researcher noted the participants' acknowledgement that they have a challenging agenda in terms of low levels of quality culture. While acknowledging the importance of the promotion of a quality culture, it was evident from the discussions with the participants that the quality culture in HEIs in Namibia generally seems to be of an extremely low standard.

The literature review revealed that it is important for internal quality assurance systems to be in line with the national quality assurance systems to make sure that institutions meet both internal and external requirements (Schmitz & Whitworth, 2002:134). It however came to light from the enquiries that in some institutions there may be a gap between the formal legal requirements and the actual implementation of quality assurance. There appears to be a lack of publicly available, transparent information about the quality assurance processes and their outcomes in the Namibian HEIs. Where they exist, quality assurance units and offices in HEIs tend to be inadequately resourced. Although there are some excellent exceptions, central information systems, which are a key to effective decision-making, are still weak in most HEIs. The framework for best practice in quality assurance in HEIs in Namibia, aimed at the improvement of the practice of quality assurance in higher education in Namibia, was deemed necessary and, thus, such a framework was developed and suggested – See annexure to the thesis later in this chapter.

These outcomes are a clear manifestation that the main research questions, as well as the sub-questions of this study, have been answered comprehensively. It may, thus, also be argued and induced that the research study has achieved its objectives.

### **6.3 RECOMMENDATIONS**

What may HEIs in Namibia learn from these findings? Based on the research finding, this report makes concrete recommendations on the basis of examples of good practices on the way in which to introduce quality assurance in an institution.

This section presents the recommendations based on the findings of this study and the framework for best practice in quality assurance in the HEIs in Namibia.

#### ***6.3.1 Recommendations for the proposed framework for best practices in quality assurance in HEIs in Namibia***

Taking both the study results and the framework for best practice in quality assurance in HEIs in Namibia into account which was developed as the outcome for this study, the Namibian HEIs are encouraged to use this framework (included as Annexure A) as a guideline in terms of which to develop an internationally benchmarked IQA systems so as to ensure international competitiveness and comparability. The framework does, however, recognise and acknowledge that there is no “blueprint” for quality assurance systems and that HEIs are unique and operate under a variety of circumstances. This framework is, therefore, generic and non-prescriptive to avoid cloning HEIs and to allow them the opportunity to assess its suitability as regards their unique situations, and then to customise it to provide the “best fit” within the context of these individual institutions in order to meet their own individual needs and requirements.

### **6.3.1.1 Recommendations for a systematic approach to quality assurance**

- Higher education institutions in Namibia that have not yet responded to either international trends or the national quality assurance policy expectations should do so by speeding up the development of systematic quality assurance systems, processes and approaches that enjoy the benefit of international benchmarking. In addition, it is essential that these practices be guided by quality assurance *policies* that have formal status and are widely disseminated.
- Higher education institutions that have formalised quality assurance must continue to develop and strengthen these initiatives.
- Higher education institutions should develop, accept and publish performance indicators against which they assess quality.
- Institutional information systems in all HEIs must be upgraded and coupled with the increased use of institutional information to inform planning and decision-making.
- In view of the fact that quality is a relative concept and absolute quality does not exist, HEIs must clearly define the meaning of quality in their individual contexts, and they must be clear about the purpose of internal quality assurance and separate the purpose from the approach, focus and methods.
- Higher education institutions must establish structures (offices, units or centres) to support the implementation of internal quality assurance systems and processes. The availability of resources is a precondition for the successful implementation of quality assurance with the quality of these resources directly affecting the effectiveness of quality assurance systems.

These structures must be adequately resourced (human, physical and financial) as quality assurance will never be effective if it is under-resourced.

- Quality assurance must be context sensitive and, thus, individualised taking into account disciplinary characteristics, various organisational cultures, the historical position of the institution as well as the national context. Accordingly, HEIs are encouraged to adopt an all encompassing approach to developing their internal quality assurance systems and mechanisms with these systems being tailor-made for the institutions concerned, driven by their own strategic goals, fitting into the unique nature of institutions, while also fulfilling the external requirements in the process.
- Internal quality assurance processes should aim at enhancing the institution's capacity to change in order to realise the strategic goals of the institution more effectively. Higher education institutions should, thus, commit to a developmental approach in their quality assurance processes.
- The quality assurance units and offices need to be assigned with the required decision making powers and provided with the necessary technical resources.

#### ***6.3.1.2 Recommendations for internal reviews***

- Higher education institutions are encouraged to carry out, on a regular cyclical basis, internal quality assessments and reviews of their educational processes and all areas of operation such as teaching and learning, research, community engagement and support services. A ***self-assessment*** scheme should be in place to monitor and review all areas of operation of the institutions. The monitoring process should involve the systematic collection and analysis

of statistical information on key indicators such as examination success rates, the progression of students to employment or higher degrees, student recruitment numbers, responses to evaluation questionnaires, and feedback of partner institutions, etc. while the results should be made available and known within institutions. Various feedback and feed-forward loops should be in operation and should involve students, alumni, academic staff and other stakeholders. In addition, there should be provision for obtaining and acting on information from student questionnaires. The purpose of these feedback loops should be to correct deficiencies in all institutional operations while the feed-forward loops should be intended to identify envisaged developments, which should be taken into account as the basis for improvement.

- Quality assurance may be addressed in various ways, but the HEIs in Namibia are encouraged to incorporate the following important aspects which emanated from the study into their internal quality assurance systems:
  - The quality assurance systems should be based on self-assessment operating in all institutional areas at different levels on a continuous cyclical basis.
  - The institution should have internationally benchmarked mechanisms in place for the monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the quality assurance system.
  - The institution should have mechanisms in place to use the findings from both the monitoring and evaluation, and the benchmarking processes to improve the implementation of the internal quality assurance management system on an ongoing basis.

### ***6.3.1.3 Recommendations for external reviews***

Higher education institutions are encouraged to undertake periodic external assessments of their core activities such as teaching and learning, research and community engagement as well as support services, for example, by a national quality assurance body, such as NCHE, in order to ensure the objectivity, credibility and validity of the internal self-assessments.

### ***6.3.1.4 Recommendations for benchmarking***

- Higher education institutions must have in place internationally benchmarked mechanisms for the monitoring and evaluation of quality assurance systems. Benchmarking would ensure that the HEIs evaluate their achievements against appropriate national and international benchmarks. The findings from both the monitoring and evaluation, and benchmarking must be used to maintain and continuously improve the quality of academic outcomes and to “close the quality loop”.
- Despite the majority of positive recommendations as regards using benchmarking and successful examples of its current use, there are, nevertheless, still misconceptions about its applicability to higher education. Higher education institutions are, therefore, encouraged to formulate documents outlining the principles of good benchmarking, including an explanation of the concept itself. In view of the fact that the concept should be considered flexible the term should be explained rather than defined, so that the main focus would be on the understanding of the concept instead of a strict wording that would restrict its usage.

### ***6.3.1.5 Recommendations for stakeholder involvement in quality assurance***

- Although there has been progress in the implementation of systems of quality assurance in some of the participating institutions, there is still a high degree of dissatisfaction as regards the inadequate involvement of students. The study clearly shows that students are not fully involved in all aspects of internal quality assurance. As full partners in higher education, it is essential that students always be included in all aspects and levels of quality assurance.
- The involvement of other stakeholders in quality assurance at institutional level is, generally, weak and such involvement needs to be encouraged, strengthened and supported. Stakeholder involvement should not only include the involvement of the academic community, but also that of professionals, professional bodies, employers, alumni and other relevant stakeholders.
- Feedback is essential to identify strengths and identifying the areas where growth is possible (COL, 2007:55). Institutions should, therefore, have comprehensive and structured feedback systems and mechanisms in place in terms of which relevant data/information is collected from both internal and external stakeholders and analysed. Quality assurance methods should be evidence based, with outcomes and feedback from stakeholders (including students, staff, alumni, employers, and society, etc.) providing the basis for the analyses and conclusions as regards which improvements are planned.

### ***6.3.1.6 Recommendation for embedding quality culture in quality assurance***

The point of departure of sustainability in quality assurance is the development of a "*quality culture*" within the HEIs. Once a quality culture has been developed, it becomes easy to implement the processes and procedures designed to bring about high standards of quality.

Internal quality assurance systems in HEIs in Namibia should, therefore, encourage the development and promotion of a quality culture. This implies that all members of the institution understand, have a sense of ownership and take responsibility for quality in their day to day activities. Trust between students, faculty, support staff and management is basic element of quality culture which comes about through rigorously practising the quality assurance process across the board. It should also be noted that the development of a quality culture in HEIs involves a holistic approach so as to account for all aspects of quality in terms of faculty, research, curricula management, governance, and students, etc.

### **6.3.2 Recommendations to the National Council for Higher Education**

- It is recommended that the NCHE supports HEIs in the development of institutional quality assurance systems and processes.
- It is furthermore recommended that the NCHE assists HEIs to build capacity as regards quality assurance to ensure the effectiveness of internal quality assurance systems. Capacity building should entail an on-going process of ensuring that staff have the necessary technical, managerial, and leadership knowledge and skills to carry out their quality assurance responsibilities, and also that they are aware when and how to use these skills most effectively. Capacity building should involve formal quality assurance training, coaching and mentoring, self and peer appraisals, performance improvement, and supervisory activities.

### **6.3.3 Recommendations for further research studies**

The field of higher education is lying fallow and numerous opportunities exist for both studies and endless research, especially as regards quality assurance as an emerging phenomenon. The following recommendations are, therefore, made concerning further investigations in this field:

- In view of the fact that quality assurance is a dynamic and evolving process, it is recommended that this study be followed by more studies of this nature at different levels, for example, programme and departmental levels, to ensure scientific rigour in this emerging practice.

As has already been mentioned in the discussion on delimitations for this study in chapter 1, this study restricted its scope only to the degree-granting HEIs in Namibia with a university status. This, however, does not mean that quality assurance in other types of institutions that were not part of this study is of less importance. Accordingly, the study recommends that another, similar study could focus on other education sectors, such as the basic education system as well as further education institutions, including vocational training centres, to ensure that quality assurance practices are applied consistently throughout the Namibian education system.

- Finally, the Namibian HEIs are encouraged to build capacity and encourage research in higher education quality assurance in order to bridge the knowledge gap existing in the literature as this will both inform the practice and ensure scientific rigour in this emerging field. For example, further research focusing on student and employer participation in all aspects of quality assurance at institutional level would be a welcome addition to the knowledge emerging from this study. A further research study could be carried out to determine the extent to which quality assurance tools and processes contribute to building a quality culture in HEIs.

#### **6.4 CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY TO THE GENERATION OF NEW KNOWLEDGE**

The study, the first of its kind in Namibia, addressed an important issue of concern in a relatively young higher education system in Namibia, where the quality assurance systems are

relatively underdeveloped as became evident from the research findings which established that, despite a variety of developments in quality assurance, as of yet, there seems to be no systematic approaches to internal quality assurance in HEIs in Namibia.

The value of the study can be found in it being the first thorough investigation into quality assurance in HE in this African state, and the results may serve as a meaningful reference for other HE institutions. The extensive literature study provided a compilation of information on the process of quality assurance which may serve as a point of departure in the development of quality assurance systems for higher education.

The study is extremely important for Namibian HE as its current quality assurance mechanisms were benchmarked with best practice literature encompassing the global arena. It expanded the field of quality assurance in that existing gaps which were identified were addressed. The proposed framework for best practice in quality assurance in HE in Namibia makes a contribution to the field of study in that a product was created which can be used in HE in Namibia and other HE systems. It, therefore, also makes a meaningful contribution to the establishment and improvement of quality assurance systems in HE in other countries, especially in Africa where quality assurance in higher education is a relatively new phenomenon. This report will provide useful information for HEIs that are further down the quality assurance road.

## **6.5 CONCLUSION**

This thesis presented the findings of the research study which was conducted to investigate the phenomenon of mechanisms for quality assurance in HEIs in Namibia. The study found that excellence is a cornerstone of academia, but that the quest for quality has acquired a new

urgency in recent years. It also unfolded that stakeholder demand for quality higher education, competition, mass access to higher education, student and staff mobility, and the demand for an international market, are among the main drivers of change in the higher education arena that are providing the incentives for introducing the new paradigm for quality assurance.

The implementation of a more structured approach to quality assurance is, however, deemed to be a challenge for HEIs in Namibia. This study, therefore, provided some recommendations and examples of good practice aimed at the improvement of the practice of quality assurance in higher education in Namibia. The recommendations are contained in the proposed framework for best practice in quality assurance in HEIs in Namibia and included as Annexure A. It is hoped that these recommendations and examples of best practice, as provided for in the proposed framework, will provide a useful reference of good practice. They may also reveal continuing challenges in quality assurance in higher education and in areas of quality assurance in which deeper understanding may be needed and this, in turn, may provide an agenda for further discussion, research and development.

It is not expected that all the recommendations will be implemented by all HEIs immediately, as some institutions may find them aspirational. However, there should be a process of development towards these goals. In addition, it must be borne in mind that even those institutions that are able to realise them do need to have a system of quality assurance and improvement in place to enhance the higher education provided.

It is also worth mentioning that quality assurance does not apply only to the core activities of HEIs, namely, teaching and learning, research, and community engagement but that it must also touch all aspects of institutional life and operations, including the support services. Quality

assurance linked to quality culture is fundamental to the successful implementation of internal quality assurance system systems, processes and mechanisms.

This study contributed to the important debate on quality assurance in higher education and will, hopefully, provide insights into the future direction of this dynamic topic in the Namibian higher education system.

Finally, it is hoped that this thesis will increase awareness and insight, and change the existing notions about the importance of a well structured and well embedded internal quality assurance system and that this will eventually lead to improvements in the practice academic practices in higher education in Namibia.

Annexure A presents the framework for best practice in quality assurance in HEIs in Namibia as the final outcome of this study. The framework is aimed at the improvement of the practice of quality assurance in higher education in Namibia.

**ANNEXURE: A**

**A PROPOSED FRAMEWORK FOR BEST PRACTICE IN QUALITY ASSURANCE IN NAMIBIAN  
HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS**

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**2012**

This framework was developed as the final outcome of the PhD research study entitled

***Quality Assurance Mechanisms for Higher Education Institutions in Namibia***

If found to be useful, the framework is aimed at the improvement of the practice of quality assurance  
in higher education institutions in Namibia.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

<b>COL</b>	Commonwealth of Learning
<b>ENQA</b>	European Network for Quality Assurance
<b>EUA</b>	European University Association
<b>HEQC</b>	Higher Education Quality Council in South Africa
<b>IHEQN</b>	Irish Higher Education Quality Network
<b>INQAAHE</b>	International Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
<b>IUCEA</b>	Inter-University Council for East Africa
<b>NCHE</b>	National Council for Higher Education in Namibia

## GLOSSARY OF TERMINOLOGY

**Benchmarking:** A standardised method for collecting and reporting on critical operational data in a way that enables relevant comparisons among the performances of different higher education institutions or programmes, usually with a view to establishing good practice, diagnosing problems in performance and identifying areas of strengths. Benchmarking gives institutions (or programmes) the external reference and the best practices on which to base their evaluation and to design their working processes (Vlăsceanu, Grünberg & Pârlea, 2007:56).

**Quality assurance:** An all-embracing term referring to an on-going, continuous process of evaluating (assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining, and improving) the quality of higher education systems, institutions or programmes (Vlăsceanu *et al.*, 2007:29).

**Quality culture:** The notion of quality culture is understood in this study as comprising two distinct sets of elements: “shared values, beliefs, expectations and commitments towards quality” and “a structural/managerial element with defined processes that enhance quality and aim at coordinating efforts” (EUA, 2011:9).

**Quality:** Harvard and Green (1993:11–12) provide five broad approaches to defining quality in higher education as follows: As exceptional, perfection, fitness for and of purpose, value for money, and transformation.

**Self-assessment:** The process of self-assessment consists of the systematic collection of administrative data, the questioning of students and graduates, and the holding of moderated interviews with lecturers and students, resulting in a self-study report. Self-assessment is a collective institutional reflection and an opportunity for quality enhancement (Vlăsceanu *et al.*, 2007:56).

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Higher education makes a significant contribution to economic competitiveness and welfare in a global knowledge-based economy (Wahab, 2010:297). According to Wahab (2010:299), the higher education sector has always been conscious of academic excellence and high standards. In recent years, however, quality higher education has become an increasingly important phenomenon that attracts the attention of various stakeholders. There are many reasons for this, such as mass higher education, globalisation, internationalisation of higher education, increasing competition, growing pressure for accountability by accreditation and funding bodies and, most importantly, the need to transform teaching and learning practices (Jonathan, 2000:55).

The above factors are some of the principal developments that have triggered the need to introduce systematic quality assurance systems and processes in higher education the world over. In order to measure the effectiveness of the higher education sector, quality assurance and assessment have become an integral part of higher education throughout the world. Today, quality assurance is no longer an option but rather a requirement if higher education institutions wish to ensure high academic standards, integrity and accountability, and subsequently enhance their global comparability and competitiveness. Provision of quality higher education has become an essential element for the survival of higher education institutions in the highly competitive higher education world. In response to this challenge, most higher education institutions worldwide have now put formal and deliberate mechanisms for quality assurance in place (Wahab, 2010:297).

In Namibia, the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) has recently introduced a System for Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Namibia. The implementation of this system started in 2009, making it compulsory for every higher education institution in Namibia (both public and private) to implement systematic internal quality assurance systems and processes supported by quality assurance policies to ensure the provision of quality higher education that would significantly contribute to the realisation of *Vision 2030* (NCHE, 2009:17).

A PhD study, entitled ***Quality Assurance Mechanisms for Higher Education Institutions in Namibia***, was subsequently conducted to identify the internal quality assurance mechanisms in place in higher education institutions in Namibia, and to evaluate the adequacy and effectiveness of the implementation of these propositions. The study revealed that the stage of development of quality assurance systems in higher education institutions in Namibia is not on a par with the expectations of the National Quality Assurance System, or with international best practices in quality assurance.

Based on the findings of the study, this proposed framework for best practice in quality assurance in Namibian higher education institutions was developed in an attempt to improve the practice of quality assurance in higher education institutions in Namibia. This framework is intended to bring structure to the systems to which it is applied, as well as to assist higher education institutions to organise their quality assurance systems and processes in a systematic manner. The framework does not attempt to prescribe the nature of the quality assurance systems, processes and mechanisms of higher education institutions, but rather to channel them in particular directions in accordance with international best practices.

## **2. THE PROPOSED FRAMEWORK FOR INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE**

As mentioned in the introductory section, to guarantee quality higher education, higher education institutions in Namibia need to implement systematic quality assurance mechanisms to ensure that they continuously improve the quality of their operations in their pursuit of excellence.

### **2.1 Perspectives on quality in higher education**

Quality is a relative, multidimensional and context-bound concept, and can be defined in many different ways. For instance, it can be viewed as excellence, fitness for purpose, value for money, customer satisfaction, zero defects, and transformation (Harvey & Green, 1993:11).

Instead of creating a universal and explicit definition of quality for higher education institutions, this framework found it more relevant to examine quality as a relative and contextual concept. As the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) put it, quality is always bound to satisfying customer needs (IUCEA, 2008:6). As no definition of quality is best for every situation, defining quality ultimately remains a common task for higher education institutions and their key customers and stakeholders.

### **2.2 Perspectives on quality assurance in higher education**

Quality assurance in higher education, just like quality, can be defined in different ways. For example, Vlăsceanu *et al.* (2007:74) define *quality assurance* as an all-embracing term referring to an on-going, continuous process of evaluating (assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining, and improving) the quality of higher education systems, institutions or programmes. This framework provides a definition of quality assurance based on the

understanding of a quality cycle (planning, implementation, evaluation and review), which is in turn founded on self-evaluation operating cyclically in all institutional areas at different levels. Thus, quality assurance should be seen as an instrument for the continuous improvement of higher education, based on a quality cycle establishing the appropriate interaction between planning, implementation, evaluation/assessment and review of operations.

### **2.3 The purpose of quality assurance systems**

The study from which this framework emanated identified *continuous quality improvement* and *accountability* as the major purposes of most internal quality assurance systems in many institutions in many countries worldwide (*cf.* Lučin, 2005:10). According to Strydom (2001:2), the purpose of quality assurance at the institutional level might be to

- improve higher education institutions and their programmes
- provide assurance to the public regarding the achievement of the required general level of quality
- provide assurance to the public and other stakeholders that a particular set of professional and academic standards has been achieved
- demonstrate effectiveness and provide accountability regarding whether or not institutional and programme intentions have been fulfilled to a satisfactory level
- determine or effect efficiency in all functions of the institution at all levels
- permit choices (programmes) to be made in the institutions in respect of funding from the government
- enable rational decisions to be made in institutions and the higher education system.

These purposes are not mutually exclusive and more than one can be used in a given set of circumstances; however, choices are necessary to serve a specific phase of the development of the quality assurance system and implementation (*cf.* Strydom, 2001:2). According to Strydom (2001:3), the purpose of the quality assurance will influence the characteristics of a quality assurance system. Quality assurance is about the procedures, processes and actions intended to support the selected purposes through evaluating, monitoring and enhancing quality.

## **2.4 Principles of good practice in quality assurance**

The Irish Higher Education Quality Network (IHEQN) has identified a set of common underpinning principles of good practice (IHEQA, 2005:1) that might be appropriate for Namibian higher education institutions. They are the following:

- The goal of quality assurance is *quality improvement*, including the enhancement of the student experience, and quality assurance procedures should reflect this.
- The ownership and main responsibility of the quality assurance process resides with the higher education institution – this is an essential condition for promoting internal quality cultures within higher education and training institutions.
- All higher education institutions are responsible for the establishment of quality assurance procedures that are clear and transparent to all their stakeholders, including staff, students, external stakeholders and the general public, in order to provide for the continuing evaluation of all academic and service departments and their activities.
- Quality assurance procedures conform to international best practice and include *self-evaluation*, followed by *external review* by persons who are competent to make national and international comparisons.

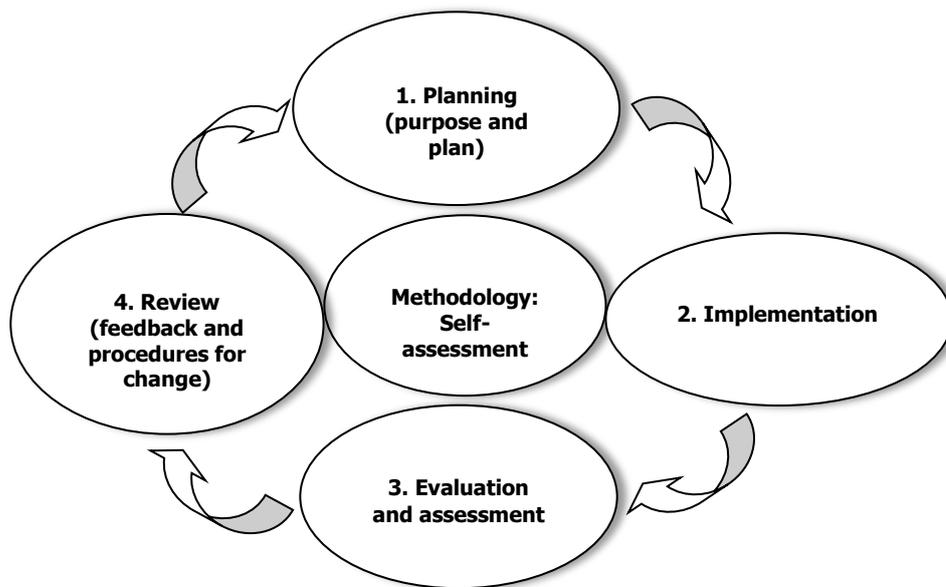
- Students, staff and other stakeholders must be involved in the quality assurance process.
- Quality assurance procedures include appropriate measures to protect the integrity of the overall quality assurance process.
- Quality assurance procedures ensure *public accountability* and *transparency* through the publication of the outcomes of the evaluations.
- The quality assurance process facilitates *continuous improvement* through the implementation of findings of evaluations of higher education institutions.
- Quality assurance procedures and their effectiveness are *reviewed* on a *cyclical basis* by independent experts and the outcomes of such reviews are published.

These principles may be helpful in setting the direction for Namibian higher education institutions wanting to excel in quality assurance.

### **3. MAIN PHASES OF THE QUALITY ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK**

This proposed framework for best practice in quality assurance in higher education institutions has been strongly influenced by the Deming Quality Cycle (planning, implementation, evaluation/assessment and review) of continuous improvement (Brennan & Shah, 2000:70). The framework guides higher education institutions in paying attention to aspects that are important in terms of quality, but does not provide any answers to how institutions should operate.

The framework can be applied as a quality assurance framework for any higher education institution. In this regard, the involvement of stakeholders is of the utmost importance when aiming to improve the quality of systems and operations. The phases of quality assurance used in the framework are shown in Figure 1.



Source: Adapted from Finnish National Board of Education (2008:8)

**Figure 1: The quality assurance framework**

The elements of the framework are planning, implementing, evaluation and assessment and review (feedback and procedures for change), each of which is assigned a set of quality criteria. Different institutions may make different choices for dealing with quality assurance and improvement (Woodhouse, 2003:17), which is why the framework presents the core quality criteria such that they can be applied to different operating environments as follows (Finnish National Board of Education, 2008:9):

- **Planning** refers to setting clear, appropriate and measurable goals and objectives in terms of policies, procedures, tasks and resources. In addition, the phase involves defining indicators to facilitate the monitoring of the achievement of these goals and objectives.
- The essential aspect of **implementation** is to establish procedures for ensuring the achievement of goals and objectives. At an institutional level procedures may vary considerably, such as in terms of the development of the operational system and the

organisational structure, resource collection, involvement of stakeholders, or development of partnership.

- ***Evaluation and assessment*** cover the evaluation of higher education provision and the assessment of the achievement of outcomes at both the system and individual levels. In general, the evaluation and assessment phase consists of two parts, i.e. the collection and processing of data and discussions, the evaluation mechanism and defining its scope, as well as providing information on the results of the evaluation.
- ***Review (feedback and procedures for change)*** forms part of a systematic and goal-oriented process used to change plans and develop operations in order to achieve the targeted outcomes and to set new objectives. The aim is to learn from information acquired in different ways, such as by discussing and analysing the results together with the key stakeholders. It is also possible to learn from good practices by using them to benchmark the user's own operations.

The ***methodology*** may differ. Quality assurance emphasises self-evaluation combined with external evaluation. Self-assessment is regarded as the main process in quality assurance, through which higher education institutions evaluate their performance on the basis of evidence and subsequently produce self-assessment reports. The purpose of self-assessment is to lead to the improvement of the entire higher education institution and its higher education offering.

#### **4. CRITERIA AND STANDARDS**

The institutional development of this framework was drawn from information gathered from certain international examples. Therefore, it is in line with other international best practice frameworks for quality assurance. This framework therefore has the potential for rendering Namibian higher education institutions internationally comparable.

The quest for quality is not an easy one, especially since there is no absolute quality or objective quality. Nevertheless, higher education institutions are expected to assure their quality, to demonstrate their quality and to assess their quality. Having acknowledged the importance of quality assurance, the important questions are: How does one assess quality? What are the criteria for measuring quality? What are the standards against which quality is assessed? Hence, if one looks at what is said about quality, it becomes obvious that it is impossible to identify or formulate one set of general criteria or standards that can be applied across all institutions owing to the unique nature and varying purposes of higher education institutions. Consequently, the criteria will differ from institution to institution, discipline to discipline, and stakeholder to stakeholder, and different higher education institutions will have their own criteria and standards derived from their own objectives and/or demands (*cf.* IUCEA, 2008:6).

This framework does not provide an absolute yardstick for measuring the quality of education. It rather provides general guidelines for assisting higher education institutions to adapt specific criteria that will suit their unique nature and needs (*cf.* COL, 2009:17).

## **5. SELF-ASSESSMENT AS A MECHANISM FOR DISCOVERING AND MEASURING**

### **QUALITY**

If a shared concept of quality, and the criteria and standards for measuring quality, is agreed on, one can ask: What is the best way to discover quality? An important tool in the field of quality assurance is critical self-assessment. Internationally, systematic quality assurance mechanisms for higher education institutions are based on self-assessment operating in all institutional areas at different levels on a continuous cyclical basis (*cf.* Griesel, Strydom & Van der Westhuizen, 2002:59). Accordingly, self-assessment may serve as a preparation for external audit by external experts and, subsequently, the self-assessment report provides the external experts with basic information. It can also be used for self-reflection to ensure continuous improvement. Whether the purpose of self-assessment is for preparing the institution for audit or just for self-reflection, the bottom line is that self-assessment has specific value for the institution as it provides an opportunity for discovering quality.

Letuka (2000:16) identifies the specific goals of self-assessment as follows:

- To improve the institutions (purpose and goals), content, policies, procedures, services, organisational and intellectual environment and performance of the programme or institution under study
- To foster commitment by enacting the recommended improvements through participation in the study process
- To enhance the capacity of the programme or institution in question for continued self-assessment
- To yield the basis for informed decision making (planning) about the future of the programme or institution under study

- To yield written materials that can be used as the basis for external peer review or audit by quality assurance agencies or professional bodies

According to the European University Association (EUA), the goal of self-evaluation is to enhance the institutional capacity for quality improvement and change through self-reflection. When discovering quality through self-assessment the following four key questions are important (EUA, 2010:7):

- What is the institution trying to do?
- How is the institution trying to do it?
- How does it know it works?
- How does the institution change in order to improve?

These four questions are not simply a structure for writing the self-assessment report, which is an essential part of the evaluation, but also constitute guidelines for the coherent re-organisation and restructuring of the institution, for analysing its strengths and weaknesses, its opportunities and threats and, last but not least, for determining the institutional capacity for change (EUA, 2004:7).

### **5.1 Principles of effective self-assessment**

In organising an effective self-assessment, one has to take into account some basic principles (IUCEA, 2008:9):

- The self-assessment process in quality reviews engages a wide-range of stakeholders, including students.
- A self-assessment aims at improving and enhancing the quality.
- A broad basis should be created for self-assessment in order to sensitise staff and students. The entire institution has to prepare itself for it.

- Looking at quality is more than merely testing performance. It also means organisational development and shaping the institution. For real self-assessment to take place, everybody has to be responsible and involved.
- It is important that the management of the institution support the self-assessment.
- Carrying out a critical self-assessment demands good organisation; there has to be someone in charge of coordinating the self-assessment process.
- Primarily, a self-assessment should never be felt as threatening. It should not be used to assess an individual, should never be used for punishment or reward and should never be used to blame someone.

## **5.2 The organisation of the self-assessment**

The institution determines how the self-assessment is carried out. However, it is good to make use of experiences gained elsewhere. On the basis of experience with other higher education institutions some suggestions may be made that can facilitate the process (INQAAHE, 2009:18):

- Self-assessment should never be the work of one single person.
- A panel to be responsible for self-assessment should be constituted.
- This group should consist of some three to five people, chaired by a coordinator.
- Students should be involved in the self-assessment.
- A clear timetable should be set up.
- The topics that have to be considered in the self-assessment should be distributed among the panel members and each member made responsible for collecting information, and for analysing and evaluating the data obtained from the self-assessment.
- The draft results should be discussed on the largest scale possible. It is not necessary to have consensus concerning the report; however, it is necessary for as many people as possible to be aware of its content.

### 5.3 Methodologies for self-assessment

The strategies and methodology for the self-assessment may vary from one institution or programme or country to another. Jennings (2007:20) identifies several possible generic approaches, as follows:

- **Survey approach.** A questionnaire is administered to staff across the institution.
- **Guided self-assessment.** Involves structured workshops during which data are collected on the current state of the institution.
- **Assessment team approach.** Where a small team of staff, specially selected and trained as assessors, collects data and prepares a detailed report on the institution.
- **Structured learning self-assessment.** Calls for the active involvement of senior management and the collection of objective data on the current state of the institution.

### 5.4 The self-assessment report

The self-assessment must be finalised with a self-assessment report. There are several conditions to be set for the self-assessment report (IUCEA, 2008; EUA, 2010):

- Since the goal of self-assessment is to promote on-going quality improvement and strategic development, the report should be honest and self-reflective.
- Being honest, self-analytic and self-critical is the best way to get the best from the self-assessment.
- Self-assessment reports
  - are analytical and reflective
  - identify strengths, areas for improvements, opportunities and constraints
  - are concise and to the point.
- Strengths and weaknesses need to be stated explicitly; specifically, it is best to avoid playing down or hiding weaknesses, as this may not help an institution to improve.

- The self-evaluation report should culminate into a quality improvement plan. A quality improvement plan (also called self improvement plan) is a plan of action developed by the institution specifying activities, designated responsibilities and time frames in order to address the requirements and recommendations of the self-assessment report(s) in order for the institution to close the quality loop.

## 5.5 Standards and criteria for self-assessment

In self-assessment, the important question is against what standards can quality be assessed?

An institution has to formulate its own standards and criteria, but in order to be on par with stakeholder expectations and to ensure international comparability, it is essential to take into account the standards and criteria formulated by outsiders such as other institutions (for benchmarking), professional bodies, national and international quality assurance agencies.

Self-evaluation may focus on an institution as a whole, or may select a specific focus. The aspects for the self-assessment may include, but not are restricted to the following (*cf.* IUCEA, 2008:12, ENQA, 2009:6, HEQC, 2004:6; NCHE, 2009:16, INQAAHE, 2009:13):

Quality aspects to be assessed	Criteria	Looking for evidence
<p><b><i>Mission, vision, aims and objectives</i></b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution has a clearly formulated mission statement.</li> <li>• The mission statement is publicly known.</li> <li>• The mission statement is in line with the academic and social context.</li> <li>• The institution has a clear vision for its role in society.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the institution's vision for the academic training it provides?</li> <li>• What is the institution's vision for its research activities?</li> <li>• What is the institution's vision for its role in society?</li> <li>• Is the vision and mission known to the institution's community and do staff and students share the vision and mission?</li> <li>• Has the vision been translated into a clearly formulated mission statement?</li> <li>• Has the mission statement been translated into achievable and operationalised aims and objectives?</li> <li>• What is the specific profile of this institution compared with other institutions in the country and beyond?</li> </ul>

<p><b><i>Governance and management</i></b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The governance structure of the institution is clear and adequate.</li> <li>• The institution has a clear management structure in which the decision-making processes, competencies and responsibilities have been clearly defined.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What kind of management structure does the institution have in place: centralised and top down or decentralised and bottom up?</li> <li>• Have the role and functions of the central management, faculty management and staff been clearly described?</li> <li>• Does the academic staff participate in the decision-making process in teaching, research and community engagement?</li> <li>• Do students participate in the decision-making process in relation to their education?</li> <li>• Has the management structure of the institution been endorsed by the academic community?</li> <li>• Is the internal organisational structure fit for purpose?</li> <li>• What management committees are in place? Are they working adequately?</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Human resources management</i></b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution takes care of high-quality academic and support staff by clearly defining their responsibilities, by evaluating their performance on a regular basis and by means of an adequate staff appraisal system.</li> <li>• The institution provides for <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ a system for staff development to enhance the knowledge and skills of academic and support staff in conducting activities that have a direct influence on the quality of teaching and learning</li> <li>○ evaluation of the effectiveness of the provided training</li> <li>○ compilation of records of education, experience, training, and other essential qualifications required of academic and support staff.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How does the institution select and appoint its academic and support staff?</li> <li>• Is an adequate staff appraisal system in place for use in evaluating performance and promotion?</li> <li>• How is staff performance evaluated?</li> <li>• What opportunities are given for staff development and training?</li> <li>• How does the institution evaluate the efficiency of its staff development activities?</li> <li>• How does the institution stimulate the ethics of its students, academics and other staff?</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution establishes an activity plan and evaluates activities to encourage students, academic and support staff to be conscious in their thoughts and speech.</li> <li>• The institution enhances the professional ethics of its students, academic and support staff.</li> </ul>	
<b><i>Financial resources management</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution has adequate funding to achieve its goals and objectives.</li> <li>• The institution has an adequate financial management system.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How is the institution funded?</li> <li>• Are the sources of the financial resources and the conditions attached to the funding transparent? Do these restrict the institution's decision-making autonomy in teaching and research?</li> <li>• Are the aims, goals and objectives realistic and achievable with the funding provided?</li> </ul>
<b><i>Educational activities</i></b>	<p><i>Academic programmes:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The programmes on offer at the institution <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ a meeting the expectations of the stakeholders</li> <li>○ have clearly formulated expected learning outcomes</li> <li>○ are coherent</li> <li>○ are up to date.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the institution have a clear education policy, expressing clearly the principles for choosing programmes?</li> <li>• Does the policy clearly express rules for curriculum design and review, including the involvement of stakeholders?</li> <li>• Are the academic programmes in line with the mission statement of the institution and principles of employability?</li> <li>• Are the programmes on offer based on an overarching didactic concept that has been adequately communicated to and realised by the teaching staff?</li> <li>• Do the qualifications offered correspond with international standards?</li> </ul>

	<p><i>Student assessment:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution has well-functioning student assessment systems for all programmes on offer and clear rules to ensure the quality of the assessments.</li> <li>• The institution has a clear policy to ensure that the examinations are objective, equivalent and trustworthy.</li> <li>• The institution takes care of the consistency of the examinations, consistency between programmes and consistency in time.</li> <li>• The institution has a policy to promote a variety of assessments methods.</li> <li>• The institution takes care that examination committees function adequately and perform the statutory tasks.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To what extent do assessments and examinations cover the objectives of the course and of the programme as a whole?</li> <li>• Do the assessments have clear and published grading/marketing criteria? Are the pass/fail criteria clear?</li> <li>• Are a variety of assessment methods used? What are they?</li> <li>• Are the assessment/examination regulations clear?</li> <li>• Are the procedures clear? Are they well known? Well followed?</li> <li>• Are any safeguards in place to ensure objectivity?</li> <li>• Are the students satisfied with the procedures? What about complaints from students?</li> <li>• Do clear rules exist for re-assessment and are students satisfied with these?</li> </ul>
	<p><i>Quality of staff:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The staff are competent and qualified.</li> <li>• Recruitment and promotion of academic staff are based on a merit system, which includes teaching, research and services.</li> <li>• Duties allocated are appropriate to qualifications, experience and aptitude.</li> <li>• A time management and incentive system support the quality of teaching and learning.</li> <li>• There are provisions for review, consultation and redeployment.</li> <li>• Termination, retirement and social benefits are planned and well implemented.</li> <li>• There is a well-planned staff appraisal system based on fair and objective measures in the spirit of enhancement which is carried out regularly.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are the academic staff competent and qualified for their job?</li> <li>• Are there any problems with the human resources?</li> <li>• Age profiles? Vacancies difficult to fill? What difficulties are there in attracting qualified staff?</li> <li>• What policy is pursued with regard to the employment of staff, both in teaching and research?</li> <li>• How are the academic staff prepared for the teaching task?</li> <li>• What about teaching load? The staff: student ratio? The staff: graduate ratio?</li> <li>• Is staff recruitment based on experience in teaching and research?</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is there a system of staff appraisal?</li> <li>• What role do teaching qualifications and teaching activities play in the staff members' careers?</li> <li>• What does the institution think of its human resources policy so far?</li> <li>• What future developments are there?</li> </ul>
	<p><i>Student admission:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution has clearly formulated admission criteria for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes.</li> <li>• If there is selection, the procedures and criteria are clear, adequate and transparent.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you analyse the development of the student intake? Reasons to worry? Causes of problems? Prospects for future?</li> <li>• What are the admission procedures? Are students selected? If so, how are they selected? What are the requirements?</li> <li>• What policy is pursued with regard to the intake of students? Does the institution aim to increase the intake or to stabilise it? Why?</li> <li>• What measures are taken to ensure the quality and size of the intake?</li> <li>• What effect do these measures have?</li> </ul>
	<p><i>Facilities and infrastructure:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The physical resources for the educational activities including equipment, materials and information technology are sufficient.</li> <li>• Equipment is up to date, readily available and effectively developed.</li> <li>• The institution's computer centres provide a highly accessible and reliable computer network infrastructure that enables the institution community to fully exploit information technology</li> </ul>	<p><i>Teaching rooms:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are enough lecture halls, seminar rooms, laboratories, reading rooms, and computer rooms available? Do these meet the relevant requirements?</li> <li>• Is the library sufficiently equipped for education?</li> <li>• Is the library within easy reach (location, opening hours)?</li> <li>• Are laboratory facilities and support staff sufficient?</li> </ul> <p><i>Teaching aids and tools:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are sufficient audio-visual aids available?</li> </ul>

	<p>for teaching, research and development, services and administration.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are there enough computers? Appropriate and enough computer programs (computer-aided education, mathematics programs, design programs, etc.)?</li> <li>• To what extent do the facilities/infrastructure promote or hinder delivery of the programmes?</li> <li>• Is the total budget for aids and tools sufficient?</li> </ul>
	<p><i>Library services:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution has adequate library facilities, including technology-aided learning materials to enable students to acquire information, knowledge and skills.</li> <li>• The library uses technology as a learning resource and manages its activities in a technology-enabled way.</li> <li>• The library has mechanisms to regularly evaluate the adequacy and accessibility of resources and services for students and takes appropriate remedial measures to address inadequacies.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the institution have an approved and widely disseminated library policy/strategy or equivalent?</li> <li>• Are the library resources sufficient to meet the requirements of the full-time, part-time and distance students?</li> </ul>
	<p><i>Student support and progression:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution provides efficient academic support services geared towards ensuring the quality of the academic outcomes and enhancing student success.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the student support system sufficient and efficient?</li> <li>• Does the institution have a diagnosis and remedial programme in place?</li> <li>• Does the institution have a well-structured, organised, proactive guidance and counselling unit which is accessible to all students?</li> <li>• Does the institution have sufficient infrastructure and facilities for social, cultural, sport and leisure time activities for students?</li> <li>• Does the institution promote the active participation of students in social, cultural,</li> </ul>

		sport and leisure time activities?
	<p><i>Social welfare:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution has adequate facilities for sports and recreation; health facilities, student hostels, guidance and counselling services and student support services are adequate.</li> <li>• The institution has an approved and widely disseminated social welfare policy that aims at enhancing the quality of student life.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the institution have an approved and widely disseminated social welfare policy that aims at enhancing the quality of student life?</li> <li>• Does the institution have an approved and widely disseminated policy on welcoming new students in place?</li> <li>• Does the institution have an approved and widely disseminated policy on welcoming foreign students in place?</li> <li>• Are there adequate student counselling services equipped with qualified and competent staff?</li> </ul>
<b>Research</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution has a clear research policy, setting the direction of research and deciding about the research profile and research activities.</li> <li>• The institution has a clear policy for the protection of creative efforts and especially for the protection of economic investment in creative efforts (Intellectual Property Rights Policy).</li> <li>• The institution has a clear code of conduct for research, including a code of ethics.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the institution have a clear and widely disseminated research policy or equivalent, setting the direction of research?</li> <li>• Does the institution have a policy on intellectual property rights?</li> <li>• Does the institution have a clear code of conduct for research, including a code of ethics?</li> <li>• How do the research activities reflect the mission and goals of the institution?</li> </ul>
<b>Community engagement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution has clear guidelines for consultancy and community engagement.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the institution have a clear policy, strategy and guidelines for consultancy and community engagement?</li> <li>• What role does the institution play in the local, national and international community?</li> <li>• Is there evidence of an institutional contribution to society and the community?</li> </ul>

<b>Benchmarking</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The institution uses the instrument of benchmarking for analysing the quality of its core activities and its management.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is the institution using the instrument of benchmarking? How is it using the instrument?</li> <li>Does the top management use the collected information to inform decision making?</li> </ul>
<b>Quality assurance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The institution has an adequate and effective internal quality assurance system.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Does the institution have a clear policy and procedures or handbook for quality assurance?</li> <li>Does the institution have an adequate monitoring system?</li> <li>Is there a periodic review of the institution's core mandated activities?</li> <li>Does the institution use the instrument of benchmarking for analysing the quality of its mandated activities and its management?</li> <li>Is it standard practice to monitor and evaluate the implementation of the institution's quality assurance management system?</li> <li>Are actions taken to address risks after evaluation?</li> <li>Is there evidence for all these?</li> </ul>
<b>Stakeholder satisfaction</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The institution has a structured method for obtaining feedback from its stakeholders.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is regular student evaluation carried out? How is it done? Is it adequate?</li> <li>What is done with the results of student evaluations?</li> <li>Does the institution have an insight into the opinion and feedback of graduates when they are employed?</li> <li>Are the complaints or positive feedback received from alumni used to adapt the programmes?</li> <li>Are there any structured contracts with employers and the labour market for obtaining feedback?</li> <li>How do the employers appreciate graduates?</li> <li>Are there any specific complaints?</li> <li>Are specific strengths appreciated by employers?</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the institution have any tools to obtain feedback from society?</li> </ul>
<b><i>Internationalisation</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution has adequate policies and procedures to deal with international affairs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the institution have a policy/strategy or equivalent on internalisation?</li> <li>• Is there evidence of workable links with other institutions nationally and internationally?</li> <li>• Does the institution have a strategy to attract and host international students and visiting scholars in place?</li> </ul>

Higher education institutions should assume responsibility for quality assurance practices. Assessment should be based on previously agreed upon objectives and criteria. Accordingly, internal and external assessment should form part of an integrated approach to quality assurance based on internal self-assessment combined with external or peer assessment. Combining internal self-assessment with external or peer assessment would ensure validity, objectivity and credibility of self-assessment as nobody can be a fair judge of his or her own case (*cf.* COL, 2010:2).

The framework highlights five conditions that lead to an effective internal quality assurance, namely:

- It is important not to rely on a single quality assurance instrument, such as the student questionnaires; rather there should be a mixture of several instruments to ensure good intelligence. These instruments should be related to institutional strategies and academic values and their costs and benefits should be reviewed regularly: this includes not only financial costs and benefits but also psychological aspects (e.g. do they lead to unnecessary stress or unreasonable workloads) and whether they really contribute to embedding an effective and shared quality culture, supporting the institutional strategy and providing accountability towards students and the wider public.

- The most effective internal quality assurance arrangements are those that derive from effective internal decision-making processes and structures. Having clear lines of accountability and clarifying responsibilities at all levels ensures that the quality assurance system is kept as simple as possible while closing the feedback loops; this should, if anything, reduce bureaucracy by limiting data collection, reports and committees to what is absolutely necessary. It is crucial to identify who needs to know what and, furthermore, to distinguish between what is necessary versus what it would be nice to know. In addition, students and staff feel at home, first and foremost, in their faculties and departments. This argues in favour of an optimal balance between the need for a string institutional core and a degree of faculty responsibilities, between the need for an institution-wide quality assurance approach and some local variations in faculties.
- Like external quality assurance, internal quality assurance processes are also about power. Internal quality assurance can be contested if it does not successfully engage the institution's community. Leadership is essential to give the initial direction and the broad frameworks of quality assurance mechanisms. Leadership should facilitate internal debate – and even tolerate dissent – in order to make sure that quality assurance processes do not end up being imposed. Linked to this, the type of language used by the leadership and the quality assurance officers in describing the quality assurance arrangements cannot be dismissed as trivial. The more academic and the less managerial it is, the more likely it will make inroads in the institution.
- It is essential to invest in people through staff development to avoid internal quality assurance arrangements becoming punitive.

- Both institutional autonomy and self-confidence are key factors in the capacity of institutions to define quality and the purposes of their internal quality assurance processes, and to ensure that these are in line with their specific profiles, strategies and organisational cultures. In doing so, these institutions might sometimes be confronted with external quality assurance agencies' processes, which might be at cross-purposes. It is essential that internal and external processes are viewed together and that the higher education community – the institutions and the agencies – negotiate the articulation between the two sets of processes in order to ensure true accountability, and avoid duplication of evaluations and quality assurance fatigue (EUA, 2011:9).

## **6. EMBEDDING A QUALITY CULTURE WITHIN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS**

The effective implementation of internal quality assurance requires a commitment to a strong quality culture (Gvaramadze, 2008:445). Creating a culture of quality within higher education institutions means agreeing on a common definition of the concept of a quality culture (Harvey & Green, 1993:45). The concept of a quality culture describes the shared values and collective responsibilities of all members of higher education institutions. It is therefore built on a bottom-up approach which develops academic community through values, attitudes and behaviours within the institution (EUA, 2003:16). In the EUA perspective, quality culture is an internal organisational culture with permanent enhancement mechanisms at two distinct levels, namely:

- ***Institutional level:*** A structural and managerial element in order to enhance the quality and coordination of members. This refers to quality as an enhancement process.
- ***Individual/student and staff level:*** Cultural and psychological level of shared values, beliefs, expectations and commitment towards quality culture among individuals. This refers to quality as a transformation process.

Commitment to a culture of quality requires the involvement of all the relevant stakeholders (*cf.* Wahab, 2010:304). For the purposes of this framework stakeholders are divided into two main categories, internal and external stakeholders. Internal stakeholders include academic staff, students, top management, middle management and support staff. External stakeholders include community, alumni, industry/corporate sector, parents and organisations (government, regulatory bodies, accreditation bodies, professional bodies, etc.). The roles and responsibilities, and contributions of all these stakeholders in the pursuit of quality assurance and a quality culture need to be clearly spelt out and widely disseminated.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

Provision of quality higher education has become essential for the survival of higher education institutions in the highly competitive higher education space. Higher education institutions are expected to implement systematic approaches to quality assurance to ensure high academic standards, integrity and accountability. The development of systematic quality assurance is a long and complex process that requires the resources, competencies and continuous efforts of all stakeholders. Different frameworks for quality assurance have been implemented to facilitate quality assurance in higher education institutions throughout the world. The focal point of the proposed framework is the improvement of the practice of quality assurance in higher education in Namibia.

The framework identified four main phases in quality assurance, namely *planning, implementation, evaluation and assessment*, and *review*. It also identified self-assessment, operating in all institutional areas at different levels on a continuous cyclical basis, as an important tool for closing the quality loop. This should be backed by structured methods for

obtaining feedback from stakeholders and for benchmarking as a way to learn from the best practices. The involvement of all relevant stakeholders in all aspects of quality assurance has been also strongly recommended in this publication as an important aspect of a successful quality assurance system. The framework suggests internationally benchmarked criteria for self-assessment, which can be adapted by higher education institutions in Namibia to ensure international comparability.

The framework finally identified the need to embed a 'quality culture' in higher education institutions as an important aspect of the successful implementation of internal quality assurance systems, mechanisms and processes. It is hoped that this framework will provide useful references of best practice in quality assurance in Namibian higher education institutions and bring about much needed improvement in the practice of quality assurance in higher education in Namibia.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A: CONSENT LETTER TO THE VICE-CHANCELLORS/RECTORS

The Vice-Chancellor/Rector  
[Name of Institution]  
[Postal Address]

PO Box 6672  
Ausspannplatz  
Windhoek  
Mobile: 0812497179  
Email: nkadhila@gmail.com

<> August 2009

Dear [insert title & name]

#### **CONSENT TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AT YOUR INSTITUTION**

I am a candidate for the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Higher Education Studies at the University of the Free State in South Africa. I am conducting a study entitled "*Quality Assurance Mechanisms in Higher Education Institutions in Namibia*". The study area is higher education and the focus of the study is quality assurance. My study leaders are Drs L van der Westhuizen and MJ Bezuidenhout of the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein, South Africa.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the nature and scope of the quality assurance mechanisms implemented in public and private HEIs in Namibia.

In the study, international best practices in internal quality assurance activities in higher education have been identified. For the purposes of data collection I shall conduct interviews with staff members from certain HEIs in Namibia and who are involved in quality assurance at their institutions. Based on the research findings, a framework for internal quality assurance in higher education in Namibia will be developed and, should the study show that there is a need for such an instrument, this framework will be suggested for use by HEIs. The respondents in the study will include:

- Top management (vice-chancellor/rector, pro-vice chancellors/deputy rectors for academic affairs and research, and administration and finance)
- Directors/managers of quality assurance departments
- Chief librarians
- Directors/managers of information departments
- Directors/Managers of centres for teaching and learning/academic development

- Senior academic staff (Deans and heads of departments)
- Members of Student Representative Councils (SRC).

These respondents will be purposefully selected on the basis of the fact that, as a result of their job designations; they have overall responsibility for quality assurance in their respective departments. Accordingly, they will be in a good position to provide insights into the phenomenon under investigation, namely, mechanisms for internal quality assurance in your institution.

In order to conduct the study I require the permission of the Vice-Chancellor/Rector to allow me to gain access to data and to approach staff members for interviews.

It is hoped that the results of the study will be of value to higher education in Namibia as the envisaged internal quality assurance framework (set of criteria) will be based on international best practices and it may guide the quality assurance practices in both public and private HEIs in Namibia to ensure international competitiveness.

This study conforms to social science and/or educational research ethical standards by abiding by the code of informed consent. You are, therefore, assured of anonymity while the responses from your institution will be treated with a high level of confidentiality. A research code number will be used to identify the responses of the participants from your institution while the name of your institution, address, and other identifying information will not be directly associated with any information obtained from your institution. A master list of the individuals participating in the study and their identifying information will be kept in a secure location and, when the results of the study are published, the name of your institution, the names of the participants and other identifying information will not be used.

In the light of the above, I kindly request your permission to approach staff in your institution to provide me with the required information.

Your kind assistance and support will be greatly appreciated.

Yours sincerely,

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Mr Ngepathimo Kadhila

PhD Research student (Student number 2007029685)

## **APPENDIX B: INVITATION LETTER TO THE INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS**

PO Box 6672  
Ausspannplatz  
Windhoek  
Mobile: 0812497179  
Email: nkadhila@gmail.com

<> August 2009

Dear <person's name>

### **INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN AN INTERVIEW AS PART OF A RESEARCH STUDY**

I am currently a candidate for a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Higher Education Studies at the University of the Free State in South Africa. I am conducting a research study entitled "*Quality Assurance Mechanisms in Higher Education Institutions in Namibia*". The study area is higher education and the focus is quality assurance.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the nature and scope of the quality assurance mechanisms implemented in public and private HEIs in Namibia.

In this study, international best practices in internal quality assurance activities in higher education have been identified. For the purposes of data collection I am conducting interviews with staff members of HEIs in Namibia, who are involved in quality assurance at their institutions. Based on the research findings, a framework for internal quality assurance in higher education in Namibia will be developed and recommended for use by HEIs, should the study show there is a need for such an instrument.

The study requires the participation of key officials in the HEIs selected who are involved in quality assurance activities. The Rector/Vice-Chancellor of your institution has already provided written permission to me for you to participate in this research. I should, therefore, appreciate it if you would grant me the opportunity to conduct a structured in-depth interview with you at your institution. Please provide me with the date, time and venue which would be most convenient to you between <date> and <date> <month> <year>. The interview will last for approximately one hour. Furthermore, I am requesting permission from you to use a voice recorder device to audio record the interviews to enable me to listen to the recording and make notes as soon as possible after the interview. You are assured that I will use only the information recorded for the

purpose of this study and the information will be deleted from the voice recorder device once the study has been completed.

This study conforms to social science and/or educational research ethical standards by abiding by the code of informed consent. Participation is voluntary and you will be free to terminate or withdraw at any point during the interview. You are also assured of anonymity and your responses will be treated with the highest degree of confidentiality. A research code number will be used to distinguish your responses from those of other participants and your name, address, and other identifying information will not be associated with any information obtained from you. A master list of persons participating in the study and their identifying information will be kept in a secure location and, when the results of the study are published, your name and other identifying information will not be used. Your participation in this study will be highly appreciated, and you may be assured that, through your participation, you will be making a positive contribution to the quality of higher education in Namibia.

Yours sincerely,

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Mr Ngepathimo Kadhila  
PhD Research student (Student number 2007029685)

## **APPENDIX C: REQUEST LETTER TO THE FOCUS GROUP PANELISTS**

PO Box 6672  
Ausspannplatz  
Windhoek  
Mobile: 0812497179  
Email: nkadhila@gmail.com

<> August 2009

Dear [insert title & name]

### **REQUEST TO PARTICIPATE IN A FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION AS PART OF A RESEARCH STUDY**

I am a candidate in the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Higher Education Studies at the University of the Free State in South Africa. I am conducting a research study entitled "*Quality Assurance Mechanisms in Higher Education Institutions in Namibia*". The study area is higher education and the focus is quality assurance.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the nature and scope of the quality assurance mechanisms implemented in public and private HEIs in Namibia.

For data collection purposes I wish to conduct a focus group interview with a panel of experts who are experienced in quality assurance in higher education. Through this focus group interview I will be able to validate the findings obtained through other data collection methods and adapt the developed framework, if deemed necessary. You will be provided with a draft quality assurance framework which will be the outcome of the first phase of the study. The focus group discussion will address matters including the following: What are the characteristics of an effective internal quality assurance system in a higher education institution? What do you see is actually happening in HEIs in Namibia? What factors inhibit the implementation of effective internal mechanisms for quality assurance in HEIs in Namibia? How may these factors be addressed so as to ensure best practice in HEIs in Namibia? How may the draft quality assurance framework be improved to serve as a common framework of reference that may be used by HEIs?

I should sincerely appreciate your participation in the focus group interview. The <> of your institution already provided written permission to me regarding your participation in this research

study. The other members of the focus group will be <insert names>. The focus group interview will be conducted in [insert place] on [insert date] at [time].

This study conforms to social science and/or educational research ethical standards by abiding by the code of informed consent. You are, therefore, informed that participation is on a voluntary basis and you are free to terminate your participation or withdraw at any point during the research process. You are also assured of anonymity and your contribution will be treated with the highest degree of confidentiality. A research code number will be used to identify your contribution from those of the other participants and your name, address, and other identifying information will not be directly associated with any information obtained from you. A master list of persons participating in the study and their identifying information will be kept in a secure location and, when the results of the study are published, your name and other identifying information will not be used.

Your assistance is greatly appreciated.

Yours sincerely,

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Mr. Ngepathimo Kadhila  
PhD research student (Student number 2007029685)

## **APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

### **INFORMED CONSENT TO INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS**

*"Quality Assurance Mechanisms in Higher Education Institutions in Namibia".*

#### **Researcher:**

Mr Ngepathimo Kadhila, a candidate in the PhD in Higher Education programme at the University of the Free State.

I have been invited to take part in an individual interview and/or focus group discussion which forms part of a study entitled "*Quality Assurance Mechanisms for Higher Education Institutions in Namibia*".

#### **Aim:**

The aim of the study is to evaluate the current mechanisms for quality assurance implemented in public and private HEIs in Namibia with the ultimate goal of developing an internationally benchmarked, internal quality assurance framework to guide the practice, should this be deemed necessary.

#### **Risk:**

During the interview/focus group discussion, I will not have to talk about anything that I do not wish to discuss. I am free to withdraw from the study at any time and have the assurance that no unprocessed information will be used, nor will my identity will be revealed.

#### **Benefits:**

I understand that this study will benefit the higher education subsector in Namibia.

#### **Confidentiality:**

I understand that a research code number will be used to distinguish my responses from those of the other participants and that my name, address, and other identifying information will not be associated with any information obtained from me. When the results of this study are published, my name and other identifying information will not be used.

**Payment:**

I understand that I will not be paid for participating in the study.

**Right to withdraw:**

I understand that I do not have to take part in this study, and that my refusal to participate will not involve any penalties or loss of rights to which I am entitled. I may withdraw from the study at any time without fear of losing any service or benefits to which I am entitled.

**Signature:**

I have read this entire form of informed consent and completely understand my rights as a prospective participant. I voluntarily consent to participate in this study on DD /MM /YYYY, (time) 00h00 in (venue) \_\_\_\_\_.

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

**Date**

Name in block letters: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW FIELD NOTES

Current mechanisms for internal quality assurance existing in the HEIs that participated in the study	
Interview questions	Responses to interview questions
<p>1. What are the characteristics of <b>'quality'</b>, as you understand it at your institution?</p>	<p>According to the best practices in quality assurance "An institution, having clearly defined its mission and strategic goals and knowing what quality means in the light of its own goals, lays the groundwork for a well-functioning quality assurance system" (EUA, 2010:18). The participants were asked to indicate any characteristics of quality, as understood within their respective institutions. Numerous comments were made by the participants in the individual interviews which reflected their views on quality in their respective institutions, but the following comments were the most significant:</p> <p><i>"The characteristics of quality are to do with students performing well in their academic activities and achieving high academic standards."</i></p> <p><i>"The characteristics of quality for the staff and students are to be enthusiastic, to value each other in the learning partnership and to have an on-going commitment to learning".</i></p> <p><i>"Students choosing to be actively engaged is good sign of quality teaching and learning".</i></p> <p><i>"The curriculum should be relevant and focus on the needs of students and other stakeholders".</i></p> <p><i>"Students should be encouraged to take ownership of their learning".</i></p> <p><i>"Academics must have a sound knowledge in their subject areas of specialisation, combined with the skills to pursue a range of teaching strategies that will suit the needs of their individual students".</i></p>

	<p>Many academics indicated that their role is to provide students with the opportunity and skills to access knowledge and to use this knowledge</p> <p>This comment is typical of the responses:</p> <p><i>"Give students the skills and the methods to allow them to think independently and to be able to process data in ways which are lateral and linear".</i></p> <p>In addition, most of the participants pointed out that <i>"assessment is an integral part of the teaching and learning process and should focus on the student's attainment of outcomes and be consistent with the way the subject is taught".</i></p> <p><i>"There should be a wide variety of assessment modes, "not just pencil and paper tests".</i></p> <p><i>"Students should reflect on their own work and select the work samples to be assessed, thus encouraging student ownership of their programmes of study".</i></p> <p>The on-going professional development for academic staff was also identified as an important aspect of quality higher education. One participant pointed out that <i>"Academics are lifelong learners and they need to be supported by their institutions in terms of provision of opportunities for professional development".</i></p> <p>Another participant stated <i>"As part of this approach, HEIs should develop strong links with industry, professional bodies and the community. Practitioners need the opportunity to seek work placements in industries, business and research facilities".</i></p>
<p>2. What is your understanding of <b>'quality assurance'</b> at your institution?</p>	<p>AS in the case of the concept of quality, quality assurance has different meanings to different stakeholders, institutions, and even individuals</p>

	<p>within institutions (<i>cf.</i> Fresen, 2005:26). The participants were asked to describe what they understood by quality assurance at their institutions. Numerous responses resulted from the interactions with the participants, and they have been summarised as follows:</p> <p><i>"Quality assurance is all about putting mechanisms in place to ensure that students are achieving excellence and meeting high academic standards".</i></p> <p><i>"...all efforts are being made to achieve and maintain quality..."</i></p> <p><i>"Quality assurance is a system in place for ensuring excellence and relevance in teaching and research"</i></p> <p><i>"Quality assurance refers to quality control to check that everyone at the institution complies with the set standards."</i></p> <p><i>"You need to educate me on what is meant by quality assurance!"</i></p> <p><i>"Quality assurance refers to the process used to create deliverables..."</i></p> <p><i>"Quality assurance refers to putting procedures in place to ensure the achievement of the set standards".</i></p> <p><i>"Quality assurance refers to quality control..."</i></p>
<p>3. What is your understanding of the difference between <b>'quality'</b> and <b>'quality assurance'</b>? Give a clear explanation for your answer.</p>	<p>One of the proponents of quality assurance argues that it is important to draw a distinction between 'quality' and 'quality assurance' (Kristensen, 2008:31). The participants were asked to explain the difference between quality and quality assurance. Most of them were quite clear about the major difference between quality and quality assurance with particular reference to higher education. Numerous explanations were provided, but the following are the most significant:</p>

	<p><i>"Quality is what you produce and maintain. Quality assurance is the methods of maintaining, monitoring and showing that there is quality"</i></p> <p><i>"Quality – nominal aspirations reflected in the vision/mission and organisational objectives of the university"</i></p> <p><i>"Quality assurance – system for ensuring and monitoring quality, quality is the standard of the outcome."</i></p> <p><i>"Quality assurance is about putting procedures in place to ensure the quality, quality is producing graduates who are competent enough to meet the market expectations".</i></p>
<p>4. Do you have an institutional strategic plan or equivalent document? What is the relationship between IQA and the mission, vision, objectives and strategic plan?</p>	<p>The best practices in quality assurance stress the importance of creating a link between quality assurance processes and institutional strategic planning (EUA, 2010:18). The best practices in quality assurance furthermore advocate that strategic plan need to be integrated with quality assurance to ensure that quality assurance serves as a tool for strategic management of HEIs (<i>cf.</i> Van der Merve, 2005:13). The results of QA processes and strategic management are one of the key factors in ensuring successful quality. According to Van der Merve (2005:14), integrating quality assurance with strategic planning would broaden the quality agenda and those activities designed to embrace quality improvement. The University of the Free State has been highly successful in combining and applying the quality assurance outcomes, institutional decision-making and strategic planning processes.</p> <p>All the participating institution indicated that they had strategic plans in place that would extend over the period of five years. However, the study discovered that there was often an unclear relationship between quality assurance and the strategic plan. In some cases the internal processes were, indeed, informed by the institutional mission, vision, values and strategic plan but, in others, it appeared that the internal</p>

	<p>processes reflected the external processes as determined by the external quality assurance agencies and were only superficially related to broad institutional mission statements such as <i>"to ensure excellence and high academic standards"</i>.</p>
<p>5. Has quality assurance been institutionalised or formalised in your institution? When did your institution start introducing a quality assurance system (or equivalent)?</p>	<p>The participants were asked to indicate whether quality assurance had been institutionalised in their respective institutions and, if so, when it had introduced. All the participating institutions indicated that QA had always been part of their higher education although formalised QA was relatively new.</p> <p>One institution indicated that <i>"the concept of quality assurance was only formally introduced in 2009"</i>. According to another <i>"formalised quality assurance at our institution is dated back to 2007"</i>. The other institution indicated that <i>"although quality assurance is not yet formalised at our institution, the institution has taken an initiative to establish a Quality Assurance Committee to deal with issues pertaining to quality at the institution"</i>.</p>
<p>6. How did you introduce a quality assurance system (or equivalent)?</p>	<p>In order to promote stakeholder awareness and, hence, to ensure that the internal quality assurance system is acceptable to all parties involved, there should be a consultative engagement between senior management, academic and administrative staff, as well as students (<i>cf.</i> IUCEA, 2008c:9). The participants were asked to indicate how institutional quality assurance or equivalent had been introduced in their institutions. There were numerous responses to this question but the following are the most significant:</p> <p><i>"The institutional leadership decided on the concept, but there was no proper consultation and training and support to the individuals implementing divisions"</i>.</p>

	<p><i>"Quality assurance at our institution dates back to its inception through collaboration with stakeholders through curriculum advisory boards and partnership institutions. Formalised quality assurance was, however, introduced by management but, in my view, consultation was not wide enough to ensure the active participation of all relevant stakeholders".</i></p> <p><i>"Quality assurance was introduced at our institution as per the requirements of quality assurance agencies such as NQA and NCHE".</i></p> <p><i>"The concept resulted from good practices which were disseminated based on other institutions which had advanced experience in QA".</i></p>
<p>7. If quality assurance has been institutionalised, what are the main purposes of institutionalising quality assurance within your institution?</p>	<p>According to the best practices in QA identified in the literature, "it is very much important for HEIs to think clearly about the purposes of internal quality assurance and separate that out from approach, focus and methods" (Kristensen, 2008:9). It is essential that institutions be clear as to the extent to which quality assurance is a process for control, accountability, compliance or improvement. The literature review identified accountability and continuous improvement as the principal aims of most of the internal quality assurance systems the world over (<i>cf.</i> Jonathan, 2000:46; Brennan &amp; Shah, 2000a: 71; Lučin, 2005:10). The participants were asked to indicate the purpose of internal quality assurance in their respective institutions. To some extent, purposes, approach, focus and methods were fused together. The following list indicates the main purposes of internal quality assurance, as they emerged from the individual interview discussions:</p> <p><i>"To ensure compliance with external regulations; to conform to national and international standards; to ensure excellence and achieve high standards; to ensure compliance with the requirements of different stakeholders; for continuous improvement; to consolidate research activities and infrastructure; to harmonise workloads; to improve public</i></p>

	<i>image; curriculum change and staff development; public confidence and information”.</i>
8. Does your institution have an institutional quality assurance policy statement?	The best practices in quality assurance advocate that HEIs should have a policy, with a formal status and encompassing publicly available and associated procedures for the assurance of the quality and standards of higher education (ENQA, 2005:9). On this premise, the participants were asked to indicate whether their institutions had quality assurance policies in place that had been approved and widely disseminated. It emerged that two institutions had in place QA policy documents, which had recently been approved by their senates. Although one institution did not have a policy document, nevertheless, aspects of informal and unstructured quality assurance were embedded in the rules and regulations of the institution.
9. Mention any effort that has been made within your institution to sensitise staff and student fraternities as regards quality assurance.	<p>The participants were asked to indicate any effort that had been made at their institutions to sensitise staff and students communities with regard to quality assurance. The participants from two of the institutions revealed that workshops had been organised by the quality assurance offices in their institutions in the past although they felt that much still remained to be done to ensure that everyone was at the same point with regards to quality assurance. The following include some of the comments by the participants:</p> <p><i>"A few workshops were organised by our QA office but I feel my expectations were not met as I did not learn enough".</i></p> <p><i>"Quality assurance is new at our institutions and efforts are still going on to bring everyone on board and to build capacity..."</i></p> <p><i>"A lot has been done but as far as I am concerned a lot is still needs to be done because QA is a continuous process and we cannot remain static".</i></p>
10. How does your institution monitor	The best practices in quality assurance advocate that institutions should

<p>the achievement of its quality assurance goals and objectives?</p>	<p>ensure that the IQA systems are capable of collecting data on their performance and evaluating the implementation of quality plans (Kristensen, 2008:11). It was this premise that the participants were asked to explain how their institutions monitored the realisation of their quality assurance propositions. One of the participants indicated that <i>"Achievements of the quality assurance goals are detailed in the strategic plan and they are tracked through annual monitoring and reporting"</i>.</p> <p>With regard to strategic management, all the participating institutions indicated that they were considering developing a system for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the strategic plan.</p>
<p>11. Is quality assurance part of the management of your institution? How would you define the role of senior leadership (Vice Chancellor/Rector, Pro-Vice Chancellor/Vice Rector) in implementing quality assurance system at your institutions?</p>	<p>The literature review revealed that senior management is supposed to drive the quality assurance process if it is to be successful (<i>cf.</i> Kristensen, 2008:13). The participants were asked to explain whether quality assurance was part of the management of their respective institutions. The following includes some of the responses:</p> <p><i>"The senior leadership is the decision maker in the whole process"</i>.</p> <p><i>"The senior management creates a conducive environment for effective implementation of quality assurance propositions"</i>.</p> <p><i>"The senior management takes the lead in the whole process..."</i></p> <p><i>"The senior management monitor and evaluates the implementation of the internal quality assurance system"</i>.</p> <p><i>"Senior management delegates QA responsibilities to their subordinates"</i>.</p> <p><i>"Senior management evaluates annual progress that provides feedback to the quality plans in place at the end of each year"</i>.</p>
<p>12. What kind of structure do you have in place to support the</p>	<p>The best practices in quality assurance advocate that institutions should establish central units to support the implementation of IQA systems</p>

<p>implementation of the internal quality assurance system?</p>	<p>(EUA, 2010:20). It is, however, important to be clear and specific about the role and objectives of a quality unit as the various purposes (control, compliance, accountability, improvement) may be in conflict. Quality is not something done to people and a central unit would normally have a facilitation role (Kristensen, 2008:23). The participants were asked to identify the units or departments that were responsible for quality assurance in their institutions and what these units or departments were doing to enhance quality assurance. The data collected through interviews with the participants showed that the participating institutions all had fundamental quality assurance structures and processes in place and that remarkable progress has been made in recent years, although a number of challenges remained. Two of the participating institutions indicated that they had established centralised quality assurance offices with specialised staff responsible for coordinating the quality assurance activities. According to one of the participants, <i>"there are representative in charge of quality assurance within each faculty/department/division"</i>. In addition, two of the participating institutions also indicated that they had units in place which were responsible for pedagogical innovation that offers support to lecturers in developing effective and modern teaching methods.</p> <p>One of the participating institutions did not have a dedicated office for coordinating quality assurance activities although it has attempted to establish a quality assurance committee. Some of the participants reported that plans were at an advanced stage to establish such an office.</p>
<p>13. Do you have an internal evaluation process in place that provides feedback to the strategic plan to inform planning and decision-making?</p>	<p>The best practices in quality assurance advocate that HEIs should ensure that they collect, analyse and use information for effective decision making, planning and quality assurance processes (ENQA, 2005:9). The participants were asked to indicate whether their institutions collected, analysed and used information for effective decision making, planning</p>

	<p>and quality assurance processes. Critical quality indicators include entry points, continuous assessment results, examination results, completion rates, student feedback, graduation destination data, and stakeholder satisfaction, etc.</p> <p>Two of the institutions did not have a section which specifically addressed information systems with the current system reflecting this information in the annual report. On the other hand, one institution did have a fully-fledged institutional research (IR) office, which generated information relevant to planning and decision-making, and which made quality data and reports available to stakeholders.</p>
<p>14. Which activities does your institutional quality assurance system cover?</p>	<p>According to the best practices in quality assurance identified in the literature, "activities covered by institutional quality assurance processes include teaching and learning, research, service to society, student support services, governance and administration of the institution, etc." (EUA, 2010:19). The respondents were asked to provide examples of typical quality assurance practices (mechanisms and/or processes) that were currently in use at their institution to ensure a culture of continuous improvement in teaching and learning, research, community engagement, and support services, the extent to which these mechanisms were used, and their perceived effectiveness. Most of the participants mentioned one, two or three mechanisms in use at their institutions. A summary of participants' responses has been provided below:</p> <p><i>"Recruitment of staff, student admission, assessment of students which involves external examiners, annual appraisal of academic staff, partnerships with reputable institutions internationally, curriculum design, staff development activities, and student evaluation".</i></p>
<p>15. Which mechanisms does your institution have in place in order to</p>	<p>According to the best practices in quality assurance identified in the literature, institutions should develop systems for assurance that those</p>

<p>ensure the quality of its teaching and learning activities?</p>	<p>persons involved in student education have the necessary qualifications and competencies for the job. This includes the development of procedures for the evaluation of lecturers and their competencies, possibilities for development and an increase in the capacities for training and encouragement as regards the improvement of their personal skills (Arsovski, 2007:56). On this premise, the participants were asked to provide examples of quality mechanisms and/or processes that were currently in use in their institution. Most of the participants identified one, two or three quality assurance mechanisms that were in use in their institutions. These will be discussed below:</p> <p>When it comes to student assessments, the best practices in the quality assurance of student assessments highlight the need to ensure that assessment strategies are valid, fair and reliable. These practices also highlight the need to have policies in place that clarify for the students issues of academic honesty and the correct referencing of material used in assignments. This would include clearly defined penalties for plagiarism and collusion (Arsovski, 2007:56).</p> <p>Most of the respondents pointed out that the external examiners system was one of the mechanisms in place to maintain quality at their institutions. One of the respondents was quoted as follows: <i>"to maintain high standards and the international recognition of its academic degrees, an external examiner system is used at our institution. Senior academics from reputable institutions are appointed for a two year terms. Besides scrutinising examination papers, the external examiner also reviews marked scripts and comments on the general results, such as the objectivity and consistency standards"</i>.</p> <p>Assessment by professional bodies is also one of the most prominent mechanisms for quality assurance in the HEIs in Namibia. Most of the respondents indicated that their institutions did seek the involvement of</p>
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appropriate professional bodies for consultation and feedback, as well as for the formal recognition of their academic programmes.

Those faculties offering professional degrees indicated that their programmes were regularly assessed externally by the relevant professional bodies. According to one of the respondents: *"this is another level of assurance that academic standards are current and acceptable, both nationally and internationally"*. For example, the Faculty of Engineering's Bachelor of Engineering programmes were recently evaluated by the Engineering Council of Namibia in conjunction with the Engineering Council of South Africa.

Stakeholder feedback was another promised mechanism for quality assurance which was indicated in the individual interviews. Student feedback on the quality of teaching, in particular, was the type of feedback mechanism used in all the institutions that had participated in the study. It emerged from the interviews with the participants that both undergraduate and graduate students participate in end of course surveys to provide critiques on subject coverage and the teaching of faculty members. The information obtained is then used to drive teaching effectiveness and the quality of course contents.

The recruitment of qualified staff members was also identified as one of the prominent quality assurance mechanisms in the HEIs in Namibia. As one of the participants put it, *"Recruitment of staff members is carried out with the utmost rigour"*.

Another participant indicated that *"Candidates are identified through advertisements and recommendations and, in the case of senior appointments, Council"*.

According to yet another participant *"The institutions draw academics worldwide, and the search is without any bias with respect to nationality,*

	<p><i>religious or race”.</i></p> <p>The best practices in quality assurance argue that improving the educational skills of academic staff is also vital in the quality assurance of higher education programmes (ENQA, 2005:9). This enables academics to maintain high teaching standards, meet their individual goals and respond to their evolving roles in education.</p>
<p>16. Which mechanisms does your institution have in place in order to ensure the quality of its research activities?</p>	<p>Research is one of the core activities of HEIs. The best practices in quality assurance advocate the need for HEIs to formulate ambitious research strategies designed to encourage more academic staff members to become researchers and research supervisors and to develop the quality assurance procedures that would cover postgraduate research activities (<i>cf.</i> COL, 2009:8). The link between research and teaching and learning was also emphasised, and included the need to use research outputs in teaching and learning, and to make informed choices as regards the development of programmes and courses. In addition, it was also established that the participating institutions had both approved and widely disseminated research policies and associated processes and criteria in place for the approval of research proposals. The following include some of the comments from the participants with regard to the management of research activities at their respective institutions:</p> <p><i>"Appointment of well renowned, qualified, international, external examiners for the Masters and PhD theses and dissertations."</i></p> <p><i>"Peer review of research papers and publications..."</i></p> <p><i>"Publication of research articles in reputable journals locally and internationally."</i></p>
<p>17. Which mechanisms does your institution have in place in order to ensure the quality of its community</p>	<p>Together with teaching and research community engagement is one of the core activities of HEIs. Mention has been made in the best practices in quality assurance which were identified in the literature that HEIs</p>

<p>service activities?</p>	<p>should have in place a community engagement management system that includes strategies, policies and arrangements providing for a shared understanding of the nature, role and goals of community engagement by the institutions (NCHE, 2009:9).</p> <p>The participants were asked to indicate whether their institutions have in place quality assurance mechanisms to ensure the quality of their community engagement. It emerged that the institutions are not clear with what is actually meant by community engagement and whether this activity needs to be centralised or whether each department should take its individual responsibility for it. According to one of the participants:</p> <p><i>"The quality assurance of community engagement at our institution is an area that is still needs to be explored. Currently, there is no common understanding of what community engagement entails. Who is the community of an institution? Is it the society in the vicinity of the institution or should it be defined in broader terms?"</i></p> <p>It was observed that this comment applied to all the institutions that had participated in the study. There are not even policies on community engagement in place in all the participating institutions as no single document was identified.</p>
<p>18. Which mechanisms does your institution have in place in order to ensure the quality of its support services?</p>	<p>The best practices in quality assurance advocate that HEIs need to have in place quality assurance mechanisms for their support services to optimise the students' learning experiences and equip them to manage their personal and professional development (NCHE, 2009:17). Support services include, but are not limited to, facilities and infrastructure, human resources management, financial resources management, and student support/advice. The participants identified financial management, health and counselling services and student learning support as the common support services at their institutions. There were, however, no formalised quality assurance mechanisms in place to</p>

	<p>ensure the quality of the support services. This was evident from some of the comments made by the participants. For example:</p> <p><i>"...the human resources department ensures that they hire the right staff in terms of qualifications and experience".</i></p> <p><i>"There are several processes in my institution, ranging from financial audits, staff development activities, maintenance of infrastructure and acquisition of new ones, etc."</i></p> <p>There was, however, no mention of the existence of a comprehensive and formalised quality assurance system, which included the continuous monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the system on a cyclical basis, the use of the outcomes of the monitoring and evaluation to improve the system on an on-going basis, and the use of benchmarking activities to identify best practices.</p>
<p>19. Which stakeholders are involved in your formal quality assurance system and how?</p>	<p>One of the key principles in implementing an effective quality assurance system is the involvement and participation of the relevant stakeholders, including academic staff, administrative staff, leadership, students, alumni, as well as external stakeholders (<i>cf.</i> EUA, 2010:24). The participants were asked to discuss how students were involved in the quality assurance activities at their institutions. The responses fell into a wide range of categories with most participants mentioning one, two or three ways in which students were involved in quality assurance in their institutions. There were numerous comments made on this issue, but the following were found to be the most interesting:</p> <p><i>"Students are involved via representation on Faculty/School Boards, curriculum advisory committees, institutional student committees and governing bodies such as the Senate".</i></p>

	<p><i>"Other stakeholders, such as employers, professional bodies and the higher education community, are involved in the development of new programmes".</i></p>
<p>20. How does the process for the design of curricula and programmes work in your institution?</p>	<p>The best practices in the quality assurance of programme and/or course design and delivery advocate that the design be guided by benchmark statements for specific disciplines that may be either national or international to ensure that internationally recognised standards are being achieved and that courses provide students with the knowledge and skills that are relevant to the current job market locally, nationally and internationally (<i>cf.</i> ENQA, 2005:6). Mention is also made of the fact that the programme and/or course should be designed in consultation with students, employers and funders, to ensure relevance to local needs. The participants in the interviews indicated that <i>"All academic programmes have been or are being reviewed, or prepared anew in line with the requirements of the National Qualifications Framework"</i>.</p> <p><i>"Students and employers are represented on curriculum advisory boards and other structures"</i>.</p> <p><i>"All our programmes are approved at departmental level, faculty level, and senate, and we involve the relevant stakeholders"</i>.</p>
<p>21. What type of processes do you have in place for monitoring curriculum and programme design?</p>	<p>The best practices in terms of the quality of programme approval and review stress the importance of having clear procedures in place for the approval of new programmes/courses and modification of existing ones (ENQA, 2005:6). They also advocate a regular review of programmes and courses in order to identify good practice that may be disseminated, as well as areas of weaknesses that may be addressed and improved upon. This should include obtaining feedback from students and from employers that would facilitate the development of good programmes/courses that that fit their purpose and are relevant to the</p>

	<p>local needs of society.</p> <p>All the institutions reported that <i>"periodic programme reviews are undertaken on regular basis"</i>.</p>
<p>22. What forms of quality related evaluations are carried out at your institution and at what intervals?</p>	<p>The best practices in quality assurance identify self-evaluation as the basic element of any given quality assurance system (Kis, 2005:18). The respondents were asked to indicate the types of evaluation that are carried out at their institution and at what intervals. Most of the respondents indicated that their institutions use feedback from students, procedural manuals, annual appraisals, environmental scanning and the moderation of examination papers as forms of evaluation in their departments and/or institutions. It may, therefore, be inferred from the responses that the respondents were dwelling on the traditional conceptions of evaluation in assuring quality at their institutions. The institutions did not all have internal self-evaluation systems conducted in a systematic way on a cyclical basis. In essence, there is a general lack of knowledge with regards to a systematic quality assurance using self-evaluation, applied in all aspects of the institutional operation, and what it entails in modern HEIs.</p>
<p>23. What kind of information does your institution collect, analyse and use to ensure the effective management of the academic programmes and other activities?</p>	<p>The best practices in QA identified in the literature advocate that HEIs should have in place mechanisms to collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of performances, study programmes and other activities (ENQA, 2005:7). The knowledge available in institutions is starting point for effective quality assurance. The implementation of information systems for quality issues is also recommended. This information system should cover students' progress and their success in their studies, employment of graduates, student satisfaction with the study programmes, effectiveness of teaching, profile of student population, and key performance indicators within the institution, etc. (Arsovski, 2007:56). Numerous responses resulted from</p>

	<p>this intervention and they may be clustered to include "<i>graduation rate, progression rate, throughputs, student-lecturer ration, and staff portfolios</i>".</p> <p>It also emerged from this intervention that, as regards collecting information, one of the responding HEIs only had a management information system (MIS) in place while the other institutions were still only thinking about establishing one. However, even in the case of the institution which did have a MIS in place, there was little evidence of the use of this information in QA rather than in the general institutional planning.</p>
<p>24. In your views, how fully deployed and how effective are the quality assurance mechanisms to which you alluded?</p>	<p>One institution reported that an on-going monitoring of the quality assurance system is undertaken through a quality audit by an external quality assurance agency. Two of the institutions did not have formal mechanisms for monitoring the effectiveness of quality assurance at the time of conducting this study. All the institutions indicated that, although progress had been made in the implementation of quality assurance, they may not remain static and there is still room for improvement.</p>
<p>25. What, in your views, are the main challenges faced by your institution regarding the effective implementation of a formalised internal quality assurance system?</p>	<p>The respondents were asked to indicate the challenges and obstacles confronting their institutions as regards the effective implementation of quality assurance propositions. Class sizes were frequently mentioned during the individual interviews with the concern being that classes are, on the whole, too large to allow the full pursuit of learning opportunities that would suit the needs of individual students. The participants were reasonably clear about the major factors that inhibit the effective implementation of quality assurance propositions such as student focus versus content focus, resources, time and the quality of the academic and support staff. In many cases, the participants felt they had little control over a large number of these factors, which were, in fact, the</p>

	<p>responsibility of the institution and the system.</p> <p>One of the participants argued that <i>"Academics lack the time and opportunity to share ideas, collaborate, reflect, evaluate, adequately prepare and participate in on-going professional development. This lack of access, time and funding limits academics' opportunities to increase their skills, confidence and knowledge in teaching"</i>.</p> <p>Most of the participants agreed that poor resourcing is a major constraint to the effective implementation of the quality assurance proposition.</p> <p>Some of the participants pointed out that their institutions did not provide them with capacity building and mentoring opportunities as regards the effective implementation of quality assurance propositions.</p> <p>One of the participants argued that <i>"On paper we have a quality assurance system. To make it work is our greatest challenge"</i>.</p> <p>One of the respondents claimed that <i>"one of the big challenges we are facing is that of the misconceptions about QA on the part of different key players in our institution. Thus, quality assurance is sometimes perceived as an aspect of control, that is, quality control, a term most suitable in the manufacturing sector. Some members of the institution sometimes perceive QA as a suppressive instrument to academic freedom and institutional autonomy; as a punitive instrument against academic staff members or institutions. It is also sometimes negatively considered to be a supervisory instrument, especially where one considers him/herself to be an accomplished professor who need not be supervised in any form"</i>.</p>
<p>26. Please provide any further comment on how you perceive the implementation of a quality assurance system within your</p>	<p>Most of the respondents felt that, although much had done, there was still room for improvement. The following include some of the most significant comments from the participants:</p>

<p>institution.</p>	<p><i>"I would like to see a QA system that takes a bottom-up approach..."</i></p> <p><i>"To support the development of quality higher education, the learning environment needs to be adequately resourced in terms of human, financial and physical resources".</i></p> <p><i>"I feel that QA at my institution is not participatory enough and more work needs to be done to involve everyone concerned..."</i></p> <p><i>"On black and white, the system is in place but, in practice, a lot needs to be done to make it more effective".</i></p> <p><i>"Although the QA system has been implemented, I don't think its impact will be felt now because this system is relatively new in our institution".</i></p>
<p>27. In the light of the foregoing analysis, please suggest anything that you think should be done (if any) to improve the current practice within your institution.</p>	<p>The participants were asked to suggest the most important strategies that they thought may be used to enhance the quality assurance in their institutions. Numerous suggestions resulted from the interactions with the participants but the following are the most meaningful:</p> <p><i>"The appointment of external examiners should be relooked at to ensure that they are recruited from a broader base. This will entail amendments to institutional guidelines to clearly articulate the required profile of an external examiner. Issues to do with a potential conflict of interest should also be examined. In setting out the necessary support for external examiners the issue of providing an element of training for external examiners should also be looked at".</i></p> <p><i>"A Postgraduate Certificate or Diploma in Higher Education Practice should be developed to raise awareness about good teaching practices".</i></p>

	<p><i>"Workshops on teaching and learning should be further enhanced".</i></p> <p><i>"There is a need to have a formal induction process in place for new staff and an updated staff handbook to ensure lecturing and other staff are given all the support they require. Possibilities for mentoring new staff should also be looked at".</i></p> <p><i>"To examine the benefits from Management Information System (MIS) the establishment of a Central Data Unit should be looked at. The remit of this unit could address cleaning up institutional data and the further development of a quality reporting system. One important benefit of a unit of this type is that it could expedite the delivery of the self-service capabilities of these systems. There is a need for greater training and support on MIS".</i></p> <p><i>"...need more quality assurance professional development and capacity building needs to be expanded"</i></p> <p><i>"...need more resources or bigger budget"</i></p> <p><i>"...need specialists to coordinate quality assurance activities"</i></p> <p><i>"...need whole of institution approach to quality assurance"</i></p> <p><i>"...need better and properly coordinated quality assurance management system"</i></p> <p><i>"...need support from the institutional senior management..."</i></p> <p><i>"...need a system which is simple and less bureaucratic..."</i></p> <p><i>"Staff and students need better attitudes towards quality and quality assurance..."</i></p>
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