

**A FRAMEWORK FOR CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT IN THE
SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR**

by

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Submitted in fulfilment for the degree

DOCTOR PHILOSOPHIAE

in the

**DEPARTMENT OF MARKETING AND COMMUNICATION
MANAGEMENT**

School of Management Sciences

Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences

UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

PROMOTER: PROFESSOR R RENSBURG

October 2003

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is a result of the collective efforts of many people who have had an influence on my life, some knowingly and others unknowingly.

The thesis would not have been possible without:

Duard, for your unwavering support and understanding at times when I needed it most

Ronel, promoter and fellow Aquarian, who made this journey of self-discovery a reality

Dalene, friend and mentor, who provided the keypads free of charge and sacrificed many hours during the workshops and capturing of the data

Nelia, who has always believed in me more than I have been able

Marlene, for typing, retyping and printing

All my friends, for your support and putting up with my reclusive lifestyle for the past year

Leon, Annette, Roxanne, Kartrin and Andrea

My parents, for always supporting me and accepting my choices without judgement

Finally, Leané who teaches me every day that life is actually simplistic and extremely worthwhile if you are willing to adapt and accept the things you cannot change.

A FRAMEWORK FOR CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR

Abstract

This study explores the theoretical constructs and implementation of quality models to ensure continuous improvement in South African higher education institutions.

Globalisation issues have forced higher education institutions to use quality models to survive in the increasingly global market. Worldwide, higher education institutions have made steady progress in adopting quality models and institutional self-assessment approaches. In the United States of America, the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award (MBNQA) and in the United Kingdom, the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) have been adapted for the higher education sector and these institutions are recognising their benefits.

The higher education sector in Southern Africa has not been exempt from the global issues. Shortly after coming to power in 1994, government appointed the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) to analyse and make recommendations on higher education. The NCHE in many respects placed South African higher education in its present trajectory. A few years later, a National Working Group (NWG) was requested to advise the Minister of Education on the restructuring of the higher education landscape. The NWG recommended that the number of higher education institutions be reduced from 36 to 21 by means of mergers, acquisitions and incorporations.

Quality assurance in higher education in South Africa is neither new nor unfamiliar. A range of internal and external formal and informal quality assurance arrangements have been in place for many decades. What is new in relation to quality assurance in South Africa is the need to respond to the rapidly changing landscape that now constitutes higher education.

The Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) ensures **academic quality** by conducting institutional audits on teaching and learning, research and service learning at higher education institutions.

This study points out that there is a great need for **institutional quality** in South Africa. The changing South African higher education landscape and particularly the merging and incorporation of institutions requires a framework to ensure **institutional quality** in the higher education sector, focusing on areas like governance, finances and other institutional operations which are not a focus of the HEQC audits.

Institutional quality is addressed by adopting quality principles and institutional self-assessment approaches where issues like leadership, policy and strategy, people management and satisfaction, client/customer focus and satisfaction, resource and information management, processes, impact on society and organisational results are analysed to determine the institution's strengths and areas to improve.

This study provides an overview of the changing role of higher institutions worldwide and the organizational trends impacting on them. It also provides an overview of the higher education sector in South Africa.

A literature review of quality models is provided with specific reference to the United States Malcolm Baldrige Quality Award (MBNQA) and the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM)

In South Africa, the South African Excellence Model (SAEM) is the equivalent of the MBNQA in the USA, the EFQM in Europe and other quality models elsewhere in the world. Established in South Africa in 1998, the SAEM has been steadily gaining ground.

The South African Excellence Foundation (SAEF) is the custodian of the SAEM for organisational self-assessment. Participating in the Excellence Award Programme offers an opportunity for an organisation to be benchmarked by unbiased

independent assessors who provide a clear indication of exactly how well an organisation rates.

The SAEM has four sectors in which organisations can apply for the excellence award: business and the defence industry, Small Medium Enterprises (SME), the public service (central, provincial and parastatal) and local government. The SAEF introduced three levels instead of only one level to enable more South African organisations to apply for the award. At level 3, the starting level, organisations apply for an excellence certificate. At level 2, the more advanced level, organisations apply for an excellence prize and at level 1, the most advanced level, organisations apply for an award.

However, the SAEF does not yet make provision for a higher education institution sector and the **main objective** of the PhD was to contextualise and integrate quality models to provide a framework for continuous improvement in higher education institutions.

One of the **sub-objectives** of this study was to determine the shortcomings of the Public Sector level 3 questionnaire and propose a questionnaire for the higher education sector.

It is accepted that the academic culture in higher education will play a determining role in quality assurance. Although there are fundamental differences between higher education institutions and other organisations, higher education institutions also possess characteristics similar to most forms of organisation. Higher education institutions that use quality improvement efforts to cut costs and improve under crisis conditions are positioned to be more competitive in the future.

The findings of this study indicate that the combination of the SAEM questionnaire and workshop self-assessment approaches; can be used to ensure continuous improvement if they are contextualised for the higher education sector. The findings also indicate that the SAEM self-assessment results can be used as part of the SWOT analysis phase during strategic planning and that the objectives can be linked to the Balanced Scorecard. An example is also provided of how the

various disciplines like marketing and communication initiatives can be linked to the SAEM to ensure that the priority areas for improvement are addressed.

The SAEM findings provide a framework to benchmark faculties and support service departments. Strengths and areas for improvement are identified and prioritised at faculty, departmental and institutional level.

The analysis of quality models that have been applied in higher education institutions in the United States (MBNQA) and the United Kingdom (EFQM) provide invaluable lessons learnt for the South African higher education sector.

Finally, this study provides a framework of continuous improvement for the higher education sector in South Africa by proposing that academic self-assessment for accreditation should be run parallel to a process of institutional self-assessment. The institutional self-assessment process is based on quality models adapted for higher education institutions. This framework aims to ensure that South African higher education institutions achieve and maintain a competitive edge in the globalised economy.

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Glossary of terms

ABET	Adult Basic Education and Training
BSC	Balanced Scorecard
CHE	Council on Higher Education
CHET	Centre for Higher Education Transformation
EFQM	European Foundation for Quality Management
DoE	Department of Education
GMP	Good Management Project
HAU	Historically Advantaged Universities
HDU	Historically Disadvantaged Universities
HE	Higher Education
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council of England
HEQC	Higher Education Quality Committee
IoD	Institute of Directors
MBNQA	Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award
NPHE	National Plan on Higher Education
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
SAEF	South African Excellence Foundation
SAEM	South African Excellence Model
SAJHE	South African Journal on Higher Education
SAUVCA	South African Vice-Chancellors' Association
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
SETA	Sectoral Education and Training Authority
UNITECH	Universities and Technikon Marketing Practitioners