



# CHAPTER 7

## **CHAPTER 7**

# **PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF QUALITATIVE DATA**

### **7.1 INTRODUCTION**

As a follow-up to the questionnaire responses, interviews were arranged with a selected group of HEIs to broaden the understanding of the researcher on the issues raised by the questionnaire responses towards the research question, 'How do the transformed institutional structures influence quality assurance mechanisms in South African higher education?'. This chapter outlines the discussions that ensued along the framework provided by the researcher in Appendix C, and attempts to identify clear trends that reinforce or conflict with the data presented in Chapter 6.

Firstly, a comprehensive background to the research project was provided in order to establish a contextual framework of the study and how the institution selected fit into the broader classification of HAIs and HDIs. A common understanding of the concepts 'transformation', 'institutional governance structures' and 'quality assurance and promotion' will be elaborated on in this chapter as was discussed in the interviews.

Secondly, this chapter examines the interview responses and analyses them in the broad categories of governance for council, senate, the quality focus of the institution, and how international best practice impacts on quality in HEIs. Council's responsibilities such as accountability, fiduciary duties, policy-making,

strategic planning and allocation of resources will be discussed in detail and matched with the same variables in Chapter 6.

Thirdly, senate's responsibilities in terms of the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997 and institutional statutes within the context of quality assurance is also discussed to reflect on the institutional perspective. In this context, the issue of academic standards (see Chapter 2 section 3.3.1), the developmental approach to quality and the notion of "value for money" for students and other customers will be explored further. The international competitiveness of academic programmes is discussed within the broader framework of internationalisation and globalisation in higher education.

Fourthly, the institutional focus on quality within the notions that are largely applicable in higher education (cf. Interview Schedule in Appendix C) were discussed with participants. The quality focus permeates through all the structures in the discussions analysed in this chapter. Finally, the Institutional Forum is also discussed within the quality perspective and how HEI representatives view its role. In each of the institutional structures, their composition, functions and contribution to quality promotion, quality management and quality assurance is responded to in the words of the interviewees as far as possible.

## **7.2 COMMON UNDERSTANDING OF CONCEPTS**

It was necessary to establish a common understanding of the concepts as outlined in Chapter 1. The following key concepts that are used in the South African higher education fraternity are discussed:

### **7.2.1 TRANSFORMATION**

'Transformation' referred to the changes that are taking place in higher education since the National Council on Higher Education report, the Education White Paper as well as the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997 and its subsequent Amendments of 1999, 2000 and 2001. This common understanding includes the reconfiguration exercise since the submission of 3-Year Rolling Plans, the National Policy Priorities as well as the 'Shape and Size' report that culminated into the present-day National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE). It is also based on the policy documents rather than other discourses on transformation.

### **7.2.2 QUALITY ASSURANCE AND PROMOTION**

'Quality assurance and Promotion' referred to the principles outlined in the Education White Paper 3 on quality assurance as enunciated in Chapter 2 and the goals and approaches of the HEQC on quality as alluded to in this study. It was also indicated that the concept of quality promotion required an added effort since it is a relatively fresh concept in higher education circles as contrasted to the health and industrial models since the World War II (see Chapter 3 section 3.2 and 3.3). This is an activity that is vigorously addressed by the HEQC in order to build confidence on academic standards in this country.

Particular emphasis is placed on the structural arrangements that support quality in the institution. A point is further made that quality cuts across all operational levels of an institution. Participants were, for that reason asked to share their experiences of good practice during the period after the transformation legislation was passed; particularly since the governance structures had been refashioned (transformed) to be in alignment with the stipulations of the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997.

### **7.2.3 INSTITUTIONAL GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES**

The structures discussed are the governing council, senate and the institutional forum as outlined in Chapters 1 and 2. The aim is to determine the extent to which these structures influence QA in their institutions. This influence is intended to make an impact on the higher education transformation agenda in the future.

## **7.3 ANALYSIS OF DATA FROM THE INTERVIEWS**

A broad question *'What role has the transformed institutional structures played towards the promotion and assurance of quality at your institution?'* was asked to the participants. This question is located within the research question, and each of the component parts discussed below related to the questionnaire and the theme of this study.

### **7.3.1 GOVERNANCE AT THE LEVEL OF COUNCIL**

#### **7.3.1.1 ACCOUNTABILITY**

Institutional responses to the broad question outlined above gave an indication that the authority of councils as the highest governing body was generally accepted in both historically advantaged and disadvantaged institutions. These responses are matched with Chapter 6, Section B 4 (a) in order to identify the data that either reinforce or conflict the questionnaire data.

In the words of one respondent, *"council is established in terms of the law, and it should see to it that the institution is managed according to the strategic plan"*, and another contended

*"council has put adequate measures to ensure that there is quality, and a case in point was the establishment of more focused committees with far more accountability. Our case in point is the Audit Committee which wasn't there prior to the new management coming in, and the appointment of internal auditors, I think that is extremely important as well".*

Although Councils were charged with the governance of the institutions,

*"it was not desirable that they should embroil themselves in the day-to-day running of the institution, rather they could ensure that they influence the daily activities by crafting policies that were covering broad areas/scope of their responsibilities",*

This was another response that clarified the institutional role of council as recorded in the discussions. This view was held by both HAIs and HDIs, although in some institutions there appears to be misunderstandings about the role of council and its duties that relate to quality systems. In order to avoid, and in other instances to circumvent the conflict of interests, two institutions organised workshops ("bosberaad" which is a commonly used concept in higher education circles in South Africa) between the Councils of their institutions and their managements. In some institutions this was necessitated by *"councils who seemed to take their tasks very seriously to an extent that their enthusiasm was violating the authority of management to run the institutions on a day-to-day-basis"*. In some of these institutions agreement was reached that there should be good policies in place, and management to be held accountable to Council in the implementation of those policies. Not all these policies were in place, according to some respondents, but an effort was made to have them all approved by Council so that the work of some of those HEIs could be simplified. Section A 2 (e) of the questionnaire concurs with this assertion that institutional governance structures are facing difficulties in role clarification.



One historically advantaged institution defined their approach to institutional governance as *“to achieve the highest levels of institutional efficiency and effectiveness through sound management practices which give due consideration to the views of all stakeholders.”* (See Chapter 6, Section 6(a)).

As far as the accountability role of Council interfaces with quality, a group of senior administrators felt that people who should drive quality at an institution are management. One HDI indicated *“... if quality is in place that will show in the way we deal with the public and the way we go about our work; and I frequently say quality is not an accident, it is the result of a deliberate action.”* One HDI felt that quality should be the priority of top management and that they should be held accountable for that activity. Succinctly put, they believe that once policies are in place there ought to be instruments to measure it. This would give an indication of the areas that needed improvement. This is an attempt to ensure that quality systems are put in place in those institutions where they are lacking, and also this confirms the unevenness that is in the system as outlined in Chapter 6, Section B 4 (a). Where some HEIs (22%) do not see Council's involvement in QA, and don't believe its necessary, others (57%) believe in what they see their Councils do towards quality enhancement in their institutions.

Another dimension mentioned was that some of the personalities (or persons) in Council tended to be *“populist and political in their approach to Council business”*. This issue seems to affect the 'quality of the decision making' of council, and had a negative effect on the institution since top management was suspended for nine months and was reinstated as a result of no evidence provided. A comparison (see Section A 2 (e) & (f)), in one instance was made to the out-gone (transformed) council and the newly constituted council that seems to have its eye on the bigger picture. In this way,

*“they succeeded in persuading management to conduct its business differently and improve on their way of doing things, e.g. Council agendas*

*and supporting documentation was supposed to be thoroughly prepared well in advance to allow council members to apply their minds on the items raised, and not submit documents in the process of the meetings and expect Council to rubberstamp management decisions".*

One traditional-elite and another entrepreneurial- expanding HAI indicated that *"Council had nothing to do with quality issues. It is primarily the responsibility of senate".* Council in these entrepreneurial-expanding and traditional-elite institutions do not involve themselves in the micro-management of the institution. Rather, they seem to have the *"confidence in their top structures"* that they were doing the right thing. Additionally, *"councils expected annual reports that gave an indication of successes and failures and areas that required improvement".*

This was an indication of how seriously they were taking their accountability mandate in the context of their fiduciary responsibilities regardless of their transformed nature. In this instance councils are making an indirect impact in the QA mechanisms put in place by mandating their responsibilities.

Where the composition of council had increased to include other substantive stakeholders, in an entrepreneurial-expanding HAI various council members seemed to have different expectations in that *"the constituency driven appointees of council needed to go back to their constituencies and seek approval for certain issues discussed at Council"*. This appeared to be in contravention with the letter and spirit of the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997: 27(7)(b) which stipulates that

*"the members of a Council must participate in the deliberations of the Council, in the best interests of the public higher education institution concerned"*



This stipulation negates sectoral interests that usually manifest themselves in these deliberations. Similarly, this implies that even the Ministerial appointees on governing Councils may not go back to the Ministry to seek further mandates based on the deliberations on Councils or any of its committees.

Some of these institutions thought it was imperative that Council should *"function as a unit, and not fragmented by constituencies"*. The larger sizes of councils had necessitated its dependence more on Council Committees to do the work,

*"For instance, the Executive Committee of Council's responsibilities had increased and it expected committees such as the Human Resources, Facilities, Property, Finance and the Audit Committees of Council to take their responsibilities seriously in order to enhance quality at the institution. The Audit Committee of Council no longer regarded itself as just a financial audit committee, but also looked at institutional audit in its entirety, e.g. student intake audit, environmental audit (scanning), governance audit (how effectively things worked and what they did, and calculating indices of effectiveness and efficiency)"*.

What appears to be the institutional approach in the statement above concurs with the principle of total quality in the institution as elaborated on in Chapter 3 on TQM and the case study of Babson College in Chapter 4, Section 4.6.3 and Chapter 6 section B 8 (a).

The issue of accountability at Council seems to hinge on both the external environment as well as the internal by way of being responsive to the needs of the clients, and in this case, mainly students. In conclusion, HEIs mainly understand the role of council in a transformational context. One stable institution (HAI) does not see council busying itself with quality. Although there appears to be stability at governance that has a positive impact on quality within that

institution, the responses from unstable institutions prove the contrary as indicated in Chapter 6 Section C, 9.4.

### **7.3.1.2 FIDUCIARY RESPONSIBILITIES OF COUNCIL**

The requirements and stipulations of the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997:41 (1)(2)(3) expect Councils of HEIs to maintain good practice with regard to the utilization of the public finances and the keeping of good and reliable records. The fiduciary duties of institutions of higher learning was attested to by the fact that most *"Councils expected well researched proposals and reliable records to be put before council before it could apply its mind on them"*. This ensured that the best interests of the institution were taken into account (see Chapter 6 Section C 9.14 where 86% of HEIs supported the view). This is an element of quality that was indicated by an HDI that was reportedly succeeding in building a sound relationship within its structures.

An HAI that seems well established reported that *"toward the fulfilment of its trusteeship role, councils at this institutions treats their management with due diligence and skill"*. This aspect relates to quality in a manner that would likely increase the output of managers especially when they are acknowledged 'for a job well done'. This appears to have increased the morale of management in a way that seems to contribute towards the stability of the institution.

Some of the responsibilities that fall squarely within the approval powers of Council such as budget allocations were delegated to council committees and management. This was an indication of the level of trust that was shown by council to its committees and top structures of management. However, *"councils have ensured that internal as well as external audits were being performed in order for quality systems to be kept in place"*. *These audit reports are expected to serve at council meetings for scrutiny and approval.*

There is also an indication that certain councils do not accept deficit budgets put before them. They insist that management should get it right before ill-informed decisions were taken. This principle concurs with Crosby's absolute 'it is always cheaper to do it right first time' (Chapter 3 Section 3.2.1). Similarly, Chapter 6 (Section C, 9.14) indicated that 86% of governing councils took their fiduciary duties seriously to an extent that quality is implied and ensured as far as possible. The HDI impressions noted in Chapter 6 section 9.15 that trust is an inhibiting factor, which is point that is in conflict with the interview data.

The long list of 'inhibiting influences' on QA (Chapter 6, Section C10) relate much to the fiduciary responsibilities of Councils, and it is from these that institutions can conduct surveys that would enable the governing councils to address some of the issues they may not be aware of that can promote quality in their institutions.

### **7.3.1.3 POLICY-MAKING**

Institutions that were interviewed overwhelmingly, across all categories regarded their councils as responsible for policy formation/formulation, policy adoption and policy implementation. Although the latter was delegated to management, it was expected of management to report accurately to council on the implementation of policies, e.g. staff policies, student admissions policies, academic programme policies, etc. This is documented in some of the institutions' policy statements that were gleaned by the researcher.

An indication was made in one interview that

*"if you look at governance to a large extent, the initiatives of this university come from top management, and not from Council. Council is not heavily involved because they are part-time appointees; so most of the initiatives come from executive management on the basis of a strategic plan".*

An HDI commented that

*"... we are totally committed I think, but I think you are right that the council's position is that they do not develop policy, they approve policy that is put before it, they don't develop policy, that is external people. The management of the institution have the responsibility to develop policies and so forth and to submit to council, which we did, but it has taken us a long time."*

What this means in the context of the research question is that policies are conceptualised within the internal structures and committees steered by senior management. Council, therefore, indirectly influences policy formulation before they adopt it after extensive internal discussion.

Historically Afrikaans institutions reported on sound language policies that have been adopted by way of harmonizing communication strategies within the institution. Language seems to be a sensitive issue, and as a means of communication they made a policy to become an *"institution of dual-medium of instruction"*, meaning that Afrikaans and English are the languages used in all correspondence with their clients. No policy exists to have any of the combinations with African languages. As stated, *"those clients who preferred to undertake their courses in a particular language for purposes of marketing were free to do so"*.

Additionally, as a matter of policy they compensate for the disadvantaged backgrounds of some students by adopting policies that would cater for the special needs of their students. In HDIs the language policy is not an issue. However, the illustration on institutional policies clearly shows the differences in historical and cultural influences in HEIs, and how the quality of education provision is not the same.

#### **7.3.1.4 STRATEGIC PLANNING**

*"Council as the governing body in terms of the law operated within the strategic plan of the institution"* is a statement made by both HDIs and HAIs. The strategic plan was developed through the input of role-players and stakeholders within the institution. The majority of the institutions reported that they normally went through the process of a SWOT analysis that enabled them to identify key areas of strength, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

The strategic plan, according to those institutions is *"time-bound"*. Regular monitoring of activities and progress made seem to be the essential ingredients of a good strategic plan. One HAI is currently reviewing its strategic planning document to align it with the new developments in higher education. *"A good strategic planning document was considered to be an indicator of quality in the institution"*. Some institutions made their strategic planning documents available for perusal by the researcher. Others made mention to them without providing them. This is understandable in South African higher education circles where competition, rather than co-operation characterises the system. Some institutions regard their strategic planning documents as confidential and sensitive because it is where they outline their strategies for their niche markets.

Whereas council was expected to familiarize itself with the strategic planning document, senior management was expected to drive the process. This is the view of all HEIs interviewed.

A case in point was made about the process of compiling a strategic planning document where a committee identified areas to be scanned in their environment, then a few staff members with expertise wrote short resumes and compiled one report out of those various inputs.

The next step would then be to prioritise these areas and appoint persons to each write a chapter of the document. Before this was finalised, it was distributed through the institutional intranet for comments and thereafter sent to Senate. Once senate had given its support, the document would then be sent to Council for implementation and monitoring. If the environment changed the plan would be reviewed and some areas may, of necessity not be continued (depending on the circumstances), and/or new developments may be added to give a particular strategic focus. These steps are largely reported by a Historically Afrikaans institution. It concurs with an assertion that quality underpins their strategic planning as an institution of higher learning.

In other institutions strategic planning documents were made available to the researcher in order to illustrate how some institutions went about their planning framework. It was also noted that some institutions were in the process of developing their strategic planning documents in line with the developments in higher education in South Africa. This point illustrates the different institutional cultures and how they relate to quality. Available public documents are an indication of a measure of quality in the system. Non-availability is an indication of internal problems that may result in the perception of lower quality in comparison to other institutions. HDIs that were interviewed referred boldly to the strategic planning documents, some produced them, whereas others could not as much as one historically English institution could not. The unevenness that is displayed in institutions is indicative of the problem statement made in Chapter 1 of this study.

Where these comprehensive plans were available they covered their mission statements, planning framework, their niche areas in order to demonstrate the institutional delivery mechanism. The complexities in higher education continued to be an impediment in some institutions especially with respect to extensive submissions being sought from time to time by the Department of Education, and



the looming uncertainties in the higher education sector with the NWG Report on the reconfiguration of the higher education system in South Africa.

There was an element of reluctance with one institution that was facing a merger because perceptions were that it would turn into a take-over of that institution. These perceptions seemed to have a negative impact on some individuals and were leading to lower morale and little commitment in certain instances that may impact negatively on quality and service delivery. The governance structural arrangements that may germinate from the merger are putting staff in awkward positions, and that does not do much for good strategic planning.

#### **7.3.1.5 ALLOCATION OF SCARCE RESOURCES**

The scarcity of resources is a perennial problem in the higher education sector as demonstrated in Chapter 6 (Section 9.5 and 9.11 of the questionnaire). In these interviews it was indicated by HDIs that their financial planning framework was in place but *"institutions were facing serious backlog as a result of their disadvantaged background"*. The need for re-dress funding was also mooted and the state was blamed for *"not providing adequate funding to certain institutions that carried the backlog of apartheid funding"*.

The unstable higher education environment was also mentioned as having a negative impact on the finances of institutions, as one HDI said " ... our 5-year financial plan is in place, *there's no need for the state to ask institutions when the environment is so unstable*". This was attributed to declining student enrolments in some institutions, and to some degree the high student debt.

Other institutions appeared to be more financially viable and were able to present no-deficit budgets to their Councils in a given financial year. Where there was a strategic reason to fund a particular activity, their financial *"reserves or cross subsidisation"* would enable them to go ahead a fund that particular activity which

they planned accurately, and was calculated to pay off in a couple of years. An example was made of a strategic decision to enrol more African students in the Natural Sciences at one HAI. This activity required marketing at school level, upgrading of teacher qualifications at school level, foundation courses to be introduced and so on. This initiative was tied to the “value for money” approach in relation to the “fitness for purpose” approach for that particular institution. If this activity is not going to provide the return in investment, they would not go ahead with it. This council approach supports the broader transformation agenda by “creating an enabling environment for students from designated group to have access and quality programmes where they were initially not permitted to study” (see Introduction in Chapter 1), was an assertion of an HAI that is seemingly serious about access and quality.

The scenario presented in these interviews was that of indigent institutions as opposed to the more affluent institutions of higher learning. This picture concurs with the research problem in that although institutions are currently legislated to be equal in the eyes of the law, there are glaring backlogs in some institutions although it appeared from one remark that there is a bit of wastage of the scarce resources in certain institutions. If this perception was anything to go by it therefore calls upon the leadership and management structures to prioritise their needs and put mechanisms in place that would eradicate wastage if it existed. Nevertheless, the influence demonstrated by Councils in this section is in alignment with the quality assurance imperatives of promoting good practice.

### **7.3.2 GOVERNANCE AT THE LEVEL OF SENATE**

Chapter 2 (section 5.3) gave an outline of the role and functions of an academic Senate in terms of the law but also in line with the historical development of Senates in the academe. The following key concepts were explored in the interviews in relation to how the [transformed] senates influence the QA mechanisms in their institutions:

### **7.3.2.1 MAINTENANCE OF ACADEMIC STANDARDS**

Academic standards are the life-blood of any academic institution everywhere else in the world (Harvey, 1996: 207). The historical context of institutions of higher learning in South Africa led to other institutions being perceived as having inferior academic standards. Others are perceived as having superior academic standards. This perception on standards is the measure or criterion (or set of criteria) against which the higher education enterprise is to be judged. According to Barnett (1995:55) "it is the performance against the standards in question that determines whether the enterprise is of high quality or not".

Some HAIs have impressive postgraduate and research output to an extent that Senates in some of these institutions are geared more towards the improvement of academic standards. Some HDIs claimed that they had very robust Senates in the tradition of their institutions, and these are playing a significant role in quality assurance.

One HAI perspective was that although the job of Senate was central to quality and good academic standards, they encountered problems of constituting quorums for several meetings of Senate. Crudely put *"some academics simply stay away from meetings and prefer to do other things, be they research, teaching and other activities."* *This issue is a concern to these institutions and measures are being put in place to encourage senators to attend meetings.*

At another institution (HAI - entrepreneurial-expanding), the restructuring of Senates by the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997 and the institutional statute helped the situation in that the total membership of Senate was significantly reduced and the restructuring of departments into multi-disciplinary schools enabled Senate to focus more on the maintenance of academic standards. Initially, the Executive Committee of Senates were "overburdened with extensive Senate work" in one HAI.

The level of debate at Senate as indicated by one HDI technikon (emerging-stable), about programmes offered, or programmes proposed, seems to improve the discourse that took place in academic boards. It was mentioned that *"quality is embedded in departments themselves"*, and *"some institutions have advisory committees to Senate with the sole purpose of improving the academic standards of institutions"*. The maintenance of academic standards seem to be done in collaboration with professional councils/associations that further assist in the accreditation of programmes offered at institutions, such as the Engineering Council of South Africa (ECSA). It should be noted that this function now resorts under the HEQC (as the ETQA primarily responsible for higher education, and expected to collaborate with other ETQAs operating in the sector) for all public and private higher education providers in this country. Although quality seemed to be getting prominence at certain institutions as a result of newer interventions like the HEQC, funding for quality remained a problem, e.g. *funding for academic reviews is either non-existent or taken from decentralised units*, as one HDI mentioned. The view is that it should resort under one centralised unit charged with the institutional and programme/subject reviews at the institution. This is the pattern that was indicated in Chapter 6 on the Economic Considerations.

Acceptable academic standards in some technikons are attested to by the high level of demand of their students by industry/employers as indicated

*"it is through those initiatives that our students are so employable and in demand, I mean, I have in fact I have fights now with some of the industries because by 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>d</sup> year they come in and book out my students ... and I say I want them here for post-graduate training... so it is a competition between them and me"*.

The interaction through curriculum review with advisory boards for every department led to high employability rate of their graduates. This is an indication that senate plays a pivotal role in the maintenance and improvement of academic

standards in some of the HDIs, although there are glaring disparities between HDI and HAIs in this respect.

### **7.3.2.2 IMPROVEMENT/DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH TO QUALITY**

The developmental approach to quality seemed to be supported by all institutions. They viewed the improvement dimension of quality as appropriate to the prevailing circumstances in the higher education sector in South Africa. However, a need is expressed by HDIs that institutions must be supported by way of building capacity in those [institutions] that were struggling as a result of the competing priorities in the sector.

Institutions viewed the self-evaluation exercises as essential to the developmental approach to quality in that

*"there are reports about students from supervisors in Advisory committees and these evaluations bring about improvement over time" and another said "it assists in reviewing the curriculum and bringing innovations from industry, our curriculum development person sits in these committees, our quality person sits on all those committees".*

In self-evaluation, an element of accountability was built and institutions could then establish benchmarks. This view was found to concur with Jackson and Lund (2000:55), that the developmental review should contain the following elements:

- Departmental self-evaluation of current arrangements using standard survey instruments.
- Collection of sample documents to illustrate how such arrangements worked in practice.
- Discussions involving departmental and institutional staff, and

- Feedback reports for each department and a summary report that provided an overview of current arrangements and highlighted noteworthy practices.

The improvement/developmental approach encouraged some departments to “share good practice” and also established solid “collaborative networks” in those institutions that appeared more advanced than others.

### **7.3.2.3 INTERNATIONAL COMPETITIVENESS OF ACADEMIC PROGRAMMES**

Some Historically Advantaged institutions appear to take the quality of their products quite seriously and seem to be investing in building a cohort of internationally competitive scholars and programmes. One institution has as its mission *“to be internationally competitive and locally relevant”*. To this end they placed a particular emphasis on their research output and introduced “Outstanding Performers” Awards that are highly competitive.

Participants are supported institutionally and encouraged and rewarded by affording institutions to *“be the best”* in what they did, and be able to do it on an international or even at a global scale. They are of the view that *“to be internally competitive meant nothing to them because an overseas competitor (in some programme) could knock them out without any meaningful resistance if they did not focus on the quality of what they did”*.

They modified their staff promotion system (reward structure) toward the goal of internationalisation. These institutions also put money into developing and nurturing productive international collaborations. This was viewed by a large entrepreneurial HAI as an element of quality that an institution of higher learning should strive to achieve.



Another group of institutions (HAIs) claimed that they had extensive student and staff exchange programmes *"with only reputable institutions"*. *"Post-graduate exchanges are proportionally more than undergraduate exchanges"*. These institutions further enjoy international accreditation of their professional programmes, and they also have external examiners for the Masters and Doctoral candidates from foreign universities. This is an indication of the role played by institutional governance structures towards quality enhancement in their institutions. This dimension benefits the entire higher education sector, and places South African higher education institutions on a pedestal in the international market (cf. Chapter 4, section 4.8).

On the contrary, HDIs seem to be lagging behind in this aspect, which is another indication of the disparities that are still in the system, a challenge left for the governance structures to do something about. There are HDIs that have sound international linkages programmes funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), administered by the Tertiary Education Linkages Programme (TELP) with the objective of building capacity in HDIs in the following focus areas:

- Curriculum and programme development
- Student academic development
- Staff development
- Management and administrative development and
- Research collaborations

#### **7.3.2.4 "VALUE FOR MONEY" FOR CUSTOMERS/STUDENTS**

Some historically advantaged institutions expressed their mindfulness of and sensitivity to their students' disadvantaged background in relation to their fee structures. This, however, did not imply that they would provide inferior programmes to their clients. Some historically disadvantaged institutions indicated that the reigning notion at their institutions was "fitness for purpose"

over “value for money”. They argued that what they were all about as an institution, mattered more in their culture.

However, the “value for money” approach as it relates to the responsibility of Senate hinged on *“soliciting project funding so that they would not over-extend themselves and consequently sacrifice quality”*. Community service seems to surface from time to time with the view to make institutions more visible around the communities they are purportedly serving. This initiative happens across all the institutions interviewed, and it concurs with institutional approaches to quality in Chapter 6, Section B 3(c).

The employment rate of some students from certain historically disadvantaged institutions was reported to be *“doing marginally well, whereas there were programmes that were not doing well at all”*. It was on the basis of this that the concept of “value for money” forced institutions to improve their programme offerings and increase their networks with employers so that their graduates entered the job market upon completion of their study programmes, or soon thereafter.

### **7.3.3 THE QUALITY FOCUS**

All HEIs seemed to support the move toward *“a quality institution”*. None of the interviewees were averse to the promotion and assurance of quality at their institutions. Some added however, that *“quality need not be structural alone, it was said to be in a state of mind”*. More symbolic statements are required in order to raise the level of awareness of clients/customers as to what the institution stood for.

Apart from the five notions of quality that are known in higher education, two participating institutions added service delivery as one of the quality focus areas.

This is an innovation aimed at influencing the quality of provision in higher education.

The dominating focus on quality in HEIs was the “excellent” academic standards – these included teaching and learning, as well as research. The quality of programmes, both in teaching and research are subject to continuous assessment that was undertaken by Quality Promotion/Assurance Units especially where they have been recently established. Other institutions have been having QPUs for a considerable period of time. Some still do not have them, but are in the process of having QA arrangements as part of their institutional quality management system.

The binary divide of HEIs has also exacerbated the different levels of quality promotion and quality assurance in higher education. The existence of SERTEC for the past decade has placed the technikon sector at a certain level as discussed in Chapter 2. The university sector on the other hand, had their internal and external arrangements that were intended to safeguard their academic integrity.

Some advantaged HEIs viewed the notion of “fitness for purpose” as critical in the quest to improve the economic well being of our society. They were reportedly having their eye on the bigger picture. The drive from the Department of Education, upon recommendation of the Council on Higher Education, further placed institutions of higher learning in a position where they needed to revise their mission statements to reflect the national quality assurance goals. It was for this reason that the “fitness for purpose” notion of quality seemed to be the dominating one. Again, this is an indication of the responsiveness of HEIs to national policy imperatives (cf. Chapter 6, Section C 9.7-9.9).

For institutions that had a financial problem in the recent past, they viewed their focus more toward "value for money" on a quality continuum. It is essential for

these institutions to sort out their financial situations first before they could incur costs in line with the mission statement that has to be read in tandem with resources.

The quality focus of institutions seems to be leaning more toward the core business and international benchmarks. The need to introduce the governance and quality interface seem to have general acceptance although some felt that quality was the business of the academia in HEIs. Others felt that the institutional focus on quality should be aggressively driven from the top structures so that it could filter down and enjoy a buy-in from other campus stakeholders. *"Quality need not be the sole domain of the academic sector"* as one of the participants asserted. It is the cornerstones of this study not to focus on the traditional QA approach, but bring about an innovation of the governance dimension into quality.

The angle of quality as "transformation" is tied to the employability of graduates and research output at post-graduate level. The employer community was also mentioned for their role in providing indicators for the quality of the graduates that eventually left HEIs with the purpose of adding value to the economy. This is another influence brought about by senate in influencing quality assurance mechanisms.

The overall impression gained on the quality focus of institutions was that of improvement. Institutions happened to be at different stages of development in terms of human resources expertise, financial viability, internal quality and management systems, and it appears that the *"cost of quality"* should also be brought to bear.

### **7.3.4 INSTITUTIONAL FORUM (IF)**

This is a relatively new structure that was borne out of the Broad Transformation Forums and most institutions did not see how the Institutional Forum could be involved in the quality improvement cycles. Some historically advantaged institutions regarded them as a "*non-event*" to an extent that they "*could not even be able to elect a chairperson*" for the Institutional Forum.

Others encounter the same tensions that were prevalent in the early 1990s of power struggles and lack of clarity and understanding of the role of the [Broad] Transformation Forums. It appears from the discussions that some senior administrators were facing the challenge of "*constantly reminding Institutional Forums that they were 'only advisory' to Councils*", and that they were not charged with the running of the institutions.

However, these are governance structures that fulfill certain mandates in terms of the current legislation. In order to keep working on this challenge, CHET in co-operation with the Department of Education organised the National Institutional Forums Conference in August 2001 which was a capacity building project entitled "***Enhancing Governance through Innovation: Building Participation in Institutional Governance.***"

It was felt by some uncertain-unstable institutions that there was no need for this additional structure of governance because all stakeholders are represented in almost, if not all committee structures. The introduction of this structure was viewed as "*a political move by the government*", and they did not see at this stage how it could add value in the system.

In an attempt to promote the ideals of co-operative governance as outlined in higher education legislation the Institutional Forum Conference outlined some of the following factors that necessitated the "**Re-thinking Stakeholderism**":

- Stakeholder conduct in the Institutional Forum must be in the institutions' interest and not individual or constituencies' interest.
- Policy framework is necessary to establish a **code of good practice/conduct** and stipulate principles that would regulate behaviour within Institutional Forum meetings.
- Institutional Forums should have strategic plans integrated and supporting the strategic plan of the institution, must also find a way to co-ordinate all relevant committee and stakeholder inputs in promoting these processes.
- Institutional Forums should embark on building trust, as lack of trust promotes individualism and constituency ideals, which is normally not in the interest of the HEIs.
- Contestation must be constructive and not destructive, and should enhance co-operation amongst all members of the Institutional Forum and promote institutional progress.
- Strategic objectives of Institutional Forums in co-operative governance, must be open and transparent (CHET/DoE, 2001:4).

The impressions of the institutions that participated in this study are confirmed by the concluding remarks of the CHET/DoE Report (2001:5) that Institutional Forums as legal structures, *"should move away from the sharp oppositional image of the past and fulfil their role in co-operative governance to one of adhering to their functions in the Act and relevant Statutes...."*

Another dimension mentioned by HEIs was that Institutional Forums were *"dominated by union representatives and students"*. In some HAs, though to a lesser extent, they reported management as chairing or dominating in



representation. This assertion is confirmed by a publication of the DoE and CHET (2000:59-66) outlining the composition of Institutional Forums in all HEIs in South Africa in April 2000. This is an indication that not all is well in the governance of HEIs and the quality imperatives yet again come to the centre stage because it is only through a supportive higher education environment that stakeholders can be motivated to add value to the institution, and thereby fulfil the goal of 'a quality institution' as outlined in 7.3.3 above.

## **7.4 CONCLUSION**

These interviews increased the insight of the researcher in so far as the institutional dynamics that influence quality in HEIs were concerned. Again, the unevenness in the system, manifests itself in how Councils, Senates and Institutional Forums conduct their business toward the quality goals of HEIs.

Institutions that were fairly well established with a strong strategic focus appeared to understand the role of governance structures as only trustees who must endorse what had been presented to them by committees and management.

Other institutions come from a background of structures that were politicized to an extent that the quality focus of the institutions was threatened and clouded by other issues of no serious consequence. Whereas others were still rocked by uncertainties of mergers and how these would translate into long-term quality outcomes, it remains to be seen whether the 'good' intentions of the NPHE will pay off in the long- term.

The academic Senates continue to dominate the quality focus in so far as teaching and research are concerned, but there is an integration of functions of Senate and Council toward quality goals. This is captured in mission statements, strategic plans and policies that were formulated, adopted and implemented by

the ultimate governing body. There is consensus that quality cuts across all systems of governance (except the uncertainties of the Institutional Forums) and operational units of HEIs. According to some participants “*quality is a way of thinking*” and each individual or unit was expected to do their bit and add to the bigger picture of quality improvement everywhere else in the institution.