

# What is quality in private higher education?

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Defining what we mean by 'quality' in education is difficult and what one person thinks is essential to good quality provision may not be as important to another. Consider, for example, 'traditional' versus 'cutting-edge', or 'academic' versus 'work-oriented'. And while most of us feel that we will recognise good or poor quality 'when we see it' the fact is that whether we are students, parents, academics, employers or regulators we all need something firmer than a vague sense of what quality is when we're facing a decision about a programme or an institution.

In the South African context we are usefully given a baseline measure by the legislation governing the provision of private higher education: an institution must be registered with the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and its Higher Education (HE) programmes must be accredited by the Council on Higher Education's (CHE) Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC). The HEQC defines a quality programme as one that responds to a local, regional or national need, is constructed according to the requirements and values of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and is quality managed to assure continued relevance and value to the student.

A significant aspect of our quality consideration could, however, also be the recognition given by the employment sector when students attempt to 'convert' their education or qualification into a paying job. So employability is also important in determining whether a programme is relevant and of good quality.

Other significant indicators of quality would be whether programmes are equivalent to the same or similar programmes offered at other institutions and whether students from one institution are accepted for study at other HE institutions. This is an important aspect as entry into higher qualifications ensures that continuity and lifelong learning are possible.

The HEQC's accreditation process measures an institution's programmes against a set of predetermined criteria, each of which comprises a number of minimum standards. In addition to this, through effective and continued programme management, each institution ensures the continued academic value and relevance of its qualifications.

As far as quality is concerned, we need to be asking what we can all do to make sure that we offer our students a remarkable education; what will make us memorable to them and how do we ensure that we are the prospective and current student's preferred choice? Surely, however defined, quality is at the core of the answers to these questions.

Having an effective quality management system in place means that we are able to meet our own quality goals, so that we become creative leaders in our niche areas, able to innovate continuously off a solid academic and intellectual base.

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