



PERCEIVED OVERLAPPING FUNCTIONS OF NAMIBIA'S EXTERNAL QUALITY
ASSURANCE BODIES AND THEIR EFFECT ON HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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PERCEIVED OVERLAPPING FUNCTIONS OF NAMIBIA'S EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE BODIES AND THEIR EFFECT ON HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

PERCEIVED OVERLAPPING FUNCTIONS OF NAMIBIA'S EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE BODIES AND THEIR EFFECT ON HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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An upsurge in the quest for quality higher education caused many countries to establish external quality assurance (EQA) bodies globally. This move gave birth to multiple EQA bodies in Namibia viz. the Namibia Qualifications Authority (NQA) and National Council for Higher Education (NCHE), including numerous professional bodies. All these bodies were mandated to assure the quality of Namibia's higher education system. The latter resulted in a perception that the functions of these bodies overlap, especially regarding programme accreditation. Hence, the purpose of this study was to investigate the seemingly overlapping programme accreditation functions of the NQA, NCHE, Health Professions Council of Namibia, and Engineering Council of Namibia. The literature review focused on various conceptual frameworks used in EQA in higher education and the effects of EQA on higher education institutions.

An interpretive research paradigm underpinned the study, complemented by a qualitative research design, to gain insight into the participants' perspectives about the perceived overlapping programme accreditation functions. Purposive sampling was used, and interview guides were designed to collect data through semi-structured individual interviews from a sample of twenty participants: thirteen academics from one public and one private university, and seven Quality Assurance (QA) and Accreditation Officers from three EQA bodies. Document analysis was also

used as a way of triangulating the data and increasing the trustworthiness of the findings. The data were analysed deductively and inductively and presented thematically.

The main findings confirmed the perceived overlaps in programme accreditation regarding the processes followed and the criteria used. The biggest overlaps appeared to be between the NQA and NCHE. Positive effects ranging from improved internal QA systems to increased stakeholder trust; and negative effects, such as demands of accreditation and difficulties with review panels, were reported. A major challenge underscored was difficulties in harmonising the overlaps.

The researcher proposed an action plan that could assist the EQA bodies and government authorities to thresh out the overlaps to reduce the burden on institutions. Finally, the small sample size of this study provides an opportunity for the scope of the research to be expanded to strengthen the results and make it more generalisable.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where states otherwise by reference or acknowledgement, the work presented is entirely my own.

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Dedication

This study has been dedicated to the higher education sector and external quality assurance bodies in Namibia.

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Abbreviations and/or Acronyms

ASG-QA	African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
AUC	African Union Commission
BOTA	Botswana Training Authority
BQA	Botswana Qualifications Authority
BTEC	Botswana Tertiary Education Council
CHE	Council on Higher Education
CHEA	Council for Higher Education Accreditation
CIRT	Centre for Innovation in Research and Teaching
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
ECN	Engineering Council of Namibia
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
EQA	External Quality Assurance
EQAAs	External Quality Assurance Agencies
EQAR	European Quality Assurance Register
ESG	Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area
ESIB	National Unions of Students in Europe
ESMU	European Centre for Strategic Management of Universities
EUC	European Union Commission
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
HEQC	Council on Higher Education Quality Committee

HPCNA	Health Professions Council of Namibia
ICAN	Institute for Chartered Accountants in Namibia
IIEP	International Institute for Educational Planning
INQAAHE	International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
IQA	Internal Quality Assurance
IUM	International University of Management
MHTESTD	Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Science and Technology Development
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NCAQS	Namibia Council of Architects and Quantity Surveyors
NCHE	National Council for Higher Education
NQA	Namibia Qualifications Authority
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NTA	Namibia Training Authority
NUST	Namibia University of Science and Technology
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PAASCU	Philippine Accrediting Association of Schools, Colleges and Universities
PDCA	Plan-Do-Check-Act
QA	Quality Assurance
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
TEQSA	Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency
UNAM	University of Namibia

UQAIB	University Quality Assurance International Board
UREC	University Research Ethics Committee
USDE	U.S. Department of Education
VET	Vocational Education and Training
ZimCHE	Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

An increase in the internationalisation of higher education, the creation of knowledge-based societies and the expansion of the higher education sector, worldwide, increasingly started placing higher demands on higher education institutions and especially the quality and assurance thereof (Ahmad & Ahmed, 2022; Ayoo, Tamrat & Kuria, 2020; Gayef & Hurdag, 2014; Iqbal, Taib & Razalli, 2023; Myburgh & Calitz, 2022; Ryan, 2015; Rodriguez, 2022; Stander & Herman, 2017; Wells, 2018). Higher education systems found themselves in the middle “of the global transformation from an industrialized to a post-industrial knowledge society” (Gayef & Hurdag, 2014, p. 949), which placed a lot of pressure on both public and private higher education institutions to satisfy the various and ever-increasing demands caused by sprouting information-hungry communities and economies (Gayef & Hurdag, 2014; Martin, 2018; Matadi & Uleanya, 2022). This evolution called higher education institutions to task to ensure the continuous enhancement of all spheres of their academic and administrative services to provide a quality education to a multitude of students (Gayef & Hurdag, 2014). The concept of quality assurance (QA) that initially found its roots in the industry (Bucki, 2020; Manatos, Sarrico & Rosa, 2015), which continually strives for excellence to satisfy customer needs and wants (Ganssle, 2017; Guru99, 2020; Randhawa & Ahuja, 2017), was adapted by Western higher education systems already in the 1900s (Makhoul, 2019; Wells, 2018; Williams & Harvey, 2015). This gave rise to the establishment of external quality assurance agencies (EQAAs) that could assist higher education institutions in fulfilling the need for an increased quality higher education offering.

The United States of America was the forerunner in external quality assurance (EQA) in higher education (Brown, Kurzweil & Pritchett, 2017; Karakhanyan, 2023), but this striving-for-excellence concept gradually found its way to other higher education systems, in both developed and developing countries, in an attempt to offer academic programmes and services of an exceptional standard that will be recognised nationally and internationally (European Commission, 2020). The latter was motivated by a vision to “make ... higher education more compatible and comparable, more competitive and attractive ... for students and scholars ...” (Gayef & Hurdag, 2014, p. 949). The use of QA mechanisms and practices form an integral part of higher education across the globe, with higher education institutions being accountable for internal quality assurance (IQA) and EQA bodies being responsible for EQA (Bischof, 2018; European Commission, 2018; Gayef & Hurdag, 2014). In the context of this study, the term EQA bodies refers to both EQAAs and professional bodies.

Universally, the genesis of EQA models in higher education is believed to be one of the most noticeable developments and outcomes of the continuing internalisation and globalisation of the higher education sector (Stensaker, 2018). Hence, in an attempt not to be left behind and to keep abreast with the global transformation to a knowledge society that demanded high quality education and training be delivered to the growing numbers of students in higher education institutions, Africa has followed suit with the introduction of EQA in higher education (Ayoo et al., 2020; Gayef & Hurdag, 2014). One of the movements that encouraged the establishment and implementation of effective national, regional, and continental EQA bodies and accreditation mechanisms, was the Arusha Convention of 1981 that was substituted by the Addis Convention in 2014 (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], South Africa, 2018). The signing of such a treaty was necessitated, at the time, to ultimately strengthen IQA; reinforce and support

interregional and international collaboration in the recognition of qualifications; and ease and promote the movement and exchange of students, staff, and researchers across Africa (DHET, 2018; McKenzie, 2015; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2014).

Shortly after the country gained independence in 1990, the Government of the Republic of Namibia has made various attempts to reform the country's education system, particularly the higher education sector, to build a knowledge-based society that can survive in an increasingly competitive global higher education space (Government of the Republic of Namibia, 2004). High quality education is regarded a powerful tool to build and nurture a knowledge-based society (Atibuni, 2020; Hautemo & Uunona, 2018; Theron & Theron, 2020), hence in moving its reform agenda forward and in line with the Addis Convention, the Namibian government established several EQAAs to take charge of the country's EQA needs in higher education. The Namibia Qualifications Authority (NQA) was Namibia's first-ever EQAA, established through the NQA Act, 1996 (Act No. 29 of 1996). As the country's pioneering EQAA, the NQA is charged with the evaluation and registration of qualifications on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), accreditation, recognition of prior learning and standard setting, among other.

A second EQAA, the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE), came into being through the Higher Education Act, 2003 (Act No. 26 of 2003). The NCHE's primary functions are to oversee, monitor, assure and enhance quality in higher education through programme accreditation and institutional audits. These two EQAAs operate at a national level and although each of them has their own unique functions, they have a common function, i.e. assuring the quality of Namibia's higher education system.

A third EQAA, the Namibia Training Authority (NTA), was established through the Vocational Education and Training (VET) Act, 2008 (Act No. 1 of 2008). The NTA is regulating

the VET sector and is charged with the coordination and promotion of access, equity, and QA in Namibia's VET providers. For this study, the NTA and VET providers were excluded because the research focused primarily on programme accreditation and its associated systems and procedures in higher education institutions in Namibia.

Moreover, to further strengthen and enhance the quality of the higher education system and particularly programmes in specialised fields, additional EQA bodies, namely professional bodies, emerged. The latter are mandated to validate or accredit professional programmes offered by higher education institutions. The validation or accreditation processes followed by the professional bodies are like that practised by the NQA and NCHE. This scenario created the perception among higher education institutions, and even staff of the EQA bodies, that there is an overlap between the QA functions performed by the NQA, NCHE and the professional bodies, especially pertaining to programme accreditation.

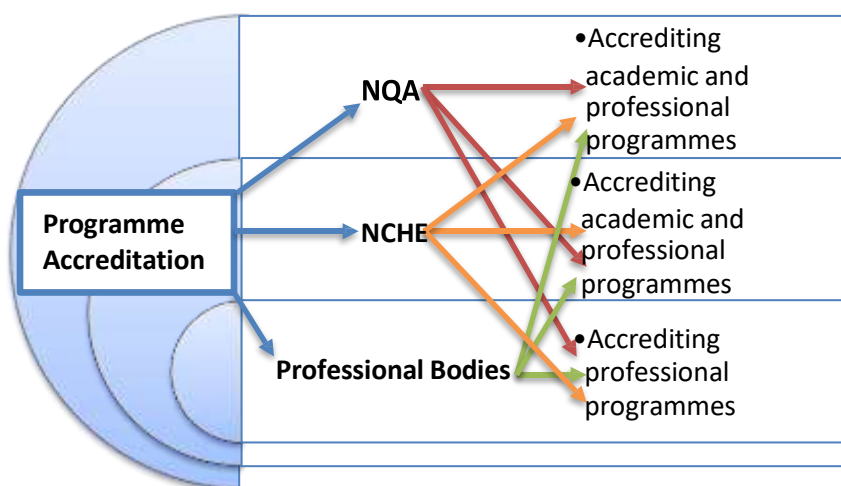
What is more, higher education institutions may apply to renowned international EQA bodies for the assessment of their programmes, simply because of the international accreditation status that would be accorded to their programmes (Makhoul, 2019). The latter mostly happens in the case of professional programmes or where joint degrees are offered in conjunction with international partner universities, and where providers of such degrees are compelled to have these programmes accredited by international professional councils on top of the accreditation done by their home EQA bodies (Frederiks, Hopbach, Rauhvargers & Tück, 2014). All EQA bodies, irrespective of the country in which they operate, normally follow similar accreditation processes, i.e. submission of an application for accreditation to the EQA body, development of a self-evaluation report by the higher education institution, gathering and presentation of evidence documents, a site visit to the institution that submitted a programme(s) for accreditation, oral

presentation of the preliminary accreditation findings conducted by the review panel, issuing of the final accreditation report and development of an improvement plan (Ayoo et al., 2020; Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2021; National Council for Higher Education [NCHE], 2009). These activities may culminate in a duplication of efforts, a waste of resources and accreditation burnout for higher education institutions (Frederiks et al., 2014; Friedman, Hogg, Nadarajah & Pitts, 2017; PhillipsKPA, 2017).

This research interest was, therefore, kindled by the seemingly overlapping programme accreditation functions of the EQA bodies and the effect they have on Namibia's higher education institutions. Figure 1 illustrates the perceived overlaps in the programme accreditation functions of the NQA, NCHE and professional bodies.

Figure 1

Perceived Overlaps in Programme Accreditation for Higher Education Institutions



As shown in Figure 1, apart from registering qualifications on the NQF, the NQA accredits the programmes (academic and professional) that lead to those qualifications, while these programmes (academic and professional) are accredited by the NCHE as well. The professional

bodies then validate or accredit the same professional programmes accredited by the NQA and the NCHE.

Chirwa (2014) claimed where powers are not defined clearly, it may not be easy to agree on what is expected or to allocate responsibilities among multiple duty-holders. Therefore, the purposes and demarcation of roles and functions of EQA bodies should be clear at the onset of their establishment (Gover & Loukkola, 2018; Kis, 2005). As the NQA came into existence before the NCHE, lawmakers assigned some accreditation functions to the NQA that seemed to be later also allocated to the NCHE. Chirwa argued that “where laws are not defined clearly, people may be sanctioned, condemned or censured for wrongs that were not considered such at the time of their commission” (2014, p. 4). The status quo may be worsened by the fact that the two EQAAs are accrediting academic as well as professional programmes, meaning that a planned site visit of a particular professional body may coincide with that of the NCHE or the NQA, or both. Consequently, it may not be possible to hold anyone accountable for a failure in the accreditation exercise, or for an alleged improper exercise of that power (Chirwa, 2014), hence the interest to conduct this study. In the study conducted by Gover and Loukkola (2018) concerning the challenges encountered in the implementation of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), it was reported that irrespective of a country’s EQA system and arrangements, it is fundamental that all stakeholders understand the objectives, functions and allocation of duties of various QA authorities, because this is a key determining factor of the confidence that the public will have in the system.

Since 2008, in its initial years of operation, the NCHE commissioned several consultancy studies in higher education coordination and legislation; however, although these reports acknowledged the perceived overlaps between the NCHE and the NQA, none of them exclusively

conducted an in-depth study about the overlapping programme accreditation functions of these EQAAs and professional bodies, and how they impact Namibia's higher education institutions. For example, the first consultancy project, entitled *Research Report on the Coordination of the Higher Education System in Namibia*, revealed a seemingly "... overlap of functions between the NQA and the NCHE. For instance, one of the functions of the NQA is accreditation, but this is the same function that the NCHE must perform in concurrence with the NQA" (Matengu & Shapi, 2008, p. 7). Likewise, another report, i.e. *Evaluation of Namibia's Higher Education Legislation in Local and Regional Context and the Provision of Recommendations*, observed the dual programme accreditation function of the NCHE and NQA, and recommended that the NQA Act be amended to exclude the accreditation of higher education programmes (Shivoro & Uupindi, 2008). In Namibia, higher education programmes include all qualifications registered on the NQF from levels 5-10 (NCHE, n.d.). Shivoro and Uupindi's recommendation was made based on section 13 (1) (b) of the NQA Act, which mandates the NQA to accredit "a course of instruction or training" (NQA Act 1996, pp. 11-12) that satisfies the occupational standards or curriculum standards of the NQA.

Furthermore, in 2012, a consultancy team was appointed to review the Namibian higher education system to heighten its chances to aid in the accomplishment of the goals of the country's Vision 2030, and especially to identify ways in which the higher education sector could assist the Namibian government to build a knowledge-based economy (NCHE, 2012). Again, the focus of this consultancy project was not on the perceived overlapping QA functions of Namibia's EQA bodies per se, but it revealed interesting findings directly related to the overlapping programme accreditation mandates of the NCHE and the NQA. Among other, it revealed that "both the NCHE and the NQA have duplicate statutory programme accreditation functions which could lead to

misunderstandings and possible conflicts unless resolved through legislative amendment or through establishing binding contractual agreements between these bodies” (NCHE, 2012, p. 117).

In addition, in a study conducted on the governance and coordination of the higher education system in Namibia, Matengu, Likando and Kangumu (2014) reported about the amendment of the Higher Education Act, 2003 (Act No. 26 of 2003), but this study did not explicitly state that the review of this Act was due to the perceived overlapping functions of EQA bodies. However, at Namibia’s first conference in QA in higher education, reference was made to duplications in the regulatory frameworks of the NCHE and the NQA. One of the recommendations that emanated from this conference was to revise the laws that govern the two EQAAs (NCHE, 2019a). This recommendation was to be spearheaded by the Ministry of Higher Education, Technology, and Innovation, through a task force that consists of representatives from the NQA and the NCHE, among other, to study and analyse the overlays and benchmark good practices in this area. Although the amendment of the Higher Education Act and the NQA Act has been proposed in these reports, it seems that no explicit research has been conducted to investigate the perceived overlaps in the roles and functions of Namibia’s EQA bodies and the effect they have on higher education institutions. In addition, it seems that no concept paper that explicitly addresses the perceived overlapping programme accreditation functions was generated and submitted to the Ministry of Higher Education, Technology, and Innovation whose responsibility and mandate it is to harmonise QA in higher education in Namibia. Therefore, there was a need to conduct a study of this nature that provides an opportunity for a concept paper with feasible recommendations to be developed and submitted to the Ministry of Higher Education, Technology, and Innovation for deliberation.

Statement of the Problem

Key national, regional, and international developmental goals and objectives prioritised the quest for and realisation of a harmonised quality higher education provision. Namibia's Vision 2030 and national development plans fully articulate and emphasise the development of efficient QA systems for the enhancement of the higher education sector (National Planning Commission, 2017). Likewise, goal four of the Sustainable Development Goals espouses a unified quality education and training provision at all levels (Chankseliani & McCowan, 2021; Liu, Kitamura & Savelyeva; 2022; Owens, 2017).

Considering these aspirations, for the past twenty years the Namibian government has left no stone unturned to reform the country's higher education system to ensure "high quality [academic] programmes and courses of study" (Ministry of Higher Education, Vocational Training, Science and Technology, 1999, p. 31) are offered. One of the milestones of this national reform agenda was the establishment of the NQA that is primarily charged with the evaluation and registration of qualifications on the NQF, with an integrated accreditation function. However, additional EQA bodies were established, because the government of Namibia believed that quality education is the catalyst that will help Namibia to "... 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 ..." (Government of the Republic of Namibia, 2004, p. 10). The NCHE is one of the additional EQA bodies that the Namibian government established with the hope that the QA system for higher education would assist the NQF in converting Namibia's higher education system into becoming more competitive and responsive to the higher education needs of the country (Matengu et al., 2014). However, the establishment of the NCHE

created disagreements and tension between the two EQA bodies as both entities were assigned an accreditation function (NCHE, 2012).

Agenda 2063 aspires for a synchronised quality higher education space and study programmes of comparable quality that are relevant to the needs of the African child (African Union Commission [AUC], 2015). In addition, through the ‘Harmonisation of African Higher Education Quality Assurance and Accreditation’ (HAQAA) initiative, the African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ASG-QA) is one of the mechanisms developed to nurture and build a coordinated QA framework to bring about harmonisation in higher education systems at national, regional, and continental level (AUC & European Union Commission [EUC], 2018). It is this type of synchronised EQA system that the Namibian higher education sector could benefit from (AUC & EUC, 2018). However, the University World News, Africa Edition, cautioned that it would be a daunting task to instantaneously establish a “single, integrated...coordinated tertiary education system” (2008, para. 14).

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) (2015) noted that as higher education takes place in an increasingly competitive world, governments try to improve the effectiveness of higher education through various strategies; however, there is a large outcry for well-structured mechanisms to assess the quality of higher education. In the same vein, Kauppila argued that “in order to be efficient and effective, higher education QA processes should function as a coherent whole” (2016, p. 19). Considering the mandates of the NQA and NCHE, both EQAAs have the function of quality assuring Namibia’s higher education system, but instead of pulling their resources together to create a coordinated national QA system for the higher education sector, these bodies conduct their functions in isolation. Therefore, higher education institutions are under the impression that the roles and functions of the NQA and NCHE overlap.

Furthermore, the accreditation function carried out by the professional bodies contributes even further to the perceived overlaps, because the EQAAs also accredit professional programmes. This practice appears to concern higher education institutions and the EQA bodies alike, because this situation is believed to cause a high level of administrative exhaustion and frustration among university staff. It also seems that resources that could have been invested more economically are channelled to a duplication of EQA activities (Friedman et al., 2017; PhillipsKPA, 2017). The identified research problem stemmed from the perception that the mandates and functions of the NQA, NCHE and professional bodies overlap. Thus, this study endeavoured to investigate the seemingly overlapping functions of the EQA bodies, and their effect on Namibia's higher education institutions.

Purpose of the Study, Research Aims, and Objectives

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the perceived overlapping programme accreditation functions of the NQA, NCHE and two of the professional bodies in Namibia, namely the Health Professions Council of Namibia (HPCNA) and the Engineering Council of Namibia (ECN), and the likely effect these functions have on Namibia's higher education institutions. In the Namibian context, the NQA and NCHE are commonly known as EQAAs, while the HPCNA and the ECN are professional bodies. However, all these organisations resort under the umbrella term, EQA bodies. Hence, for the purpose of this study, the term EQA bodies is used for issues relevant to both nomenclatures, while the terms EQAAs and professional bodies were used for issues that distinguished between the two types of EQA bodies.

All four EQA bodies are assigned the function of assuring the quality of programmes offered by the country's higher education institutions. While the NQA and the NCHE are accrediting academic and professional programmes, the HPCNA and the ECN are also validating

or accrediting professional programmes. This situation created a general perception among Namibia's higher education stakeholders that these bodies are duplicating each other's functions when it concerns the accreditation of programmes. Therefore, the objectives of this study were to:

- Explore the views of the higher education institutions, the EQAAs, and professional bodies concerning the mandates of the NQA, NCHE, HPCNA, and ECN.
- Explore the perceptions and views of the higher education institutions, the EQAAs, and professional bodies as regards the seemingly overlapping functions.
- Establish what effects the overlaps in the QA functions of the NQA, NCHE, HPCNA, and ECN have on Namibia's higher education institutions.

Nature and Significance of the Study

For each research, an appropriate theoretical framework must be chosen. Such a framework assists in the interpretation, and hence explanation, of a set of phenomena. An interpretive framework guided this study. Interpretive research is consistent with qualitative research (Creswell, 2014), and this is the approach the researcher used for this study. Qualitative research is defined as “an umbrella term covering an array of interpretive techniques, which seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world” (Van Maanen, 1979, as cited in Rahman, 2017, p. 103). Qualitative research is normally used to answer questions about the composite nature of phenomena, often with the purpose of describing and understanding the phenomena from the participants' point of view (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014). This study thus explored the views, experiences, and feelings that academic staff members, including staff from the NCHE, NQA and the two professional bodies, hold with regards to the alleged overlapping functions and their effect on higher education institutions.

Because qualitative research is said to be subjective and allows the researcher to be an integral part of the data collection, it is often criticised that the researcher's own personal views can influence the research (Andrade, 2009; Astalin, 2013; Essays, UK, 2018). However, since the researcher has vast knowledge and experience in the field of QA in higher education, due care was taken to remain objective, and uphold and respect the views and opinions of the participants. In addition, the use of multiple data sources aided in minimising potential researcher bias (Azungah, 2018). The data sources for this investigation included academic staff at the selected higher education institutions, QA and Accreditation officers at the chosen EQA bodies and selective documents of the EQA bodies.

One of the most common types of qualitative research designs used, is case studies. Astalin defined case studies as “analyses of persons, events, decisions, periods, projects, policies, institutions, or other systems that are studied holistically by one or more methods” (2013, p. 122). In this study, the researcher studied and analysed the respective Acts of Parliament that established the NCHE, NQA, HPCNA and ECN as well as their QA systems and procedures. Case studies are purported to generate rich data that cannot ordinarily be obtained through other methods (Alpi & Evans, 2019; Astalin, 2013). Characterised as a vastly flexible research design, case studies allow for a variety of data collection methods, from interviews (focus groups or individual/one-on-one) to observations and document analysis, among other, to be used (Astalin, 2013).

The researcher conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews on a one-on-one basis to collect data for this investigation, posing open-ended questions to obtain rich quality data about the perceived overlapping programme accreditation functions of these bodies and their effect on higher education institutions (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). Additionally, semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2010; Doody & Noonan, 2013; Leedy &

Ormrod, 2014), hence the researcher's choice for this data collection method to encourage the participants to talk, expressing, in their own words, the thoughts, experiences and perceptions about the phenomenon investigated. Two interview guides were designed (one for the academic staff and one for the QA and Accreditation officers), containing research questions that sufficiently depict the rationale for the study to ensure absolute clarity in terms of what the researcher attempted to find out (Cohen et al., 2010). Document analysis was also employed for this study, as it is commonly used in conjunction with other qualitative research methods, especially for the purpose of triangulation that enhanced the reliability of this research (Azungah, 2018; Bowen, 2009).

Thematic analysis, a method of qualitative data analysis, was used to analyse the data generated for this study. The data was analysed as per the Centre for Innovation in Research and Teaching's (CIRT) (2019) steps for data analysis, which are: (1) reading the data recurrently to get familiar with the views and interpretations of the participants; (2) jotting down impressions, looking for meaning and determining which pieces of data are worth keeping; (3) categorising the data and generating a framework; (4) coding or labelling the data to make retrieval easier; (5) identifying patterns and making connections; and (6) interpreting the data and explaining the findings. This data analysis approach was complemented by Kriukow's (2020) thematic analysis in Microsoft Word, which consists of three key steps, i.e. coding the data; cleaning up the data; and developing a thematic framework. Analysing data manually can be a daunting task, consume a lot of time (Azungah, 2018) and be obsolete (Dudovskiy, 2019a), but the researcher found this method to be comprehensive and followed the steps meticulously to ensure the quality, trustworthiness, and truthfulness of the data (Research Data Services, 2020). It also gave the researcher ample opportunities to go back and forth and re-engage with the data – although it was

overwhelming and laborious – to make meaning of, clarify and rework concepts as new perceptions appeared and were identified in the data (Noble & Smith, 2015).

This study was significant to clarify the roles of the EQAAs and professional bodies in quality assuring Namibia's higher education programmes. It is envisaged that this study would eliminate the perceived overlapping functions of Namibia's EQA bodies through a plan of action which the researcher proposed that could be adopted to simplify the current programme accreditation practices employed in higher education institutions. This plan of action that proposes, among other, a merger of the NQA and the NCHE or an amendment of the two EQAAs' legislations, may prove to be cost-effective and efficient in terms of time, financial and human resources. The National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB) (2002) is of the opinion that:

We must also be prepared to make every possible change in organisation and methods in order to improve student learning ... Quality does not require doing the same things that we have always done but finding new ways to achieve the goals that have always been there. It is clear however that the state will continue to have an interest in using higher education to promote important policy developments. (p. 16)

Thus, it is hoped, through this investigation, that higher education policymakers (government, higher education institutions and EQA bodies, among other) could use the new knowledge generated to improve existing policy objectives and strategies pertaining to EQA in higher education, particularly programme accreditation, or craft new policies that could effectively deal with the overall enhancement of QA in the Namibian higher education sector for the benefit of the institutions, EQA bodies, students, and the public at large.

Research Questions

Developing good research questions is a fundamental aspect of any study, as they help to determine the layout of the inquiry, keep the researcher focused on the phenomenon under investigation and navigate the researcher throughout the whole process to ultimately improve the quality of the results (Barroga & Matanguihan, 2022; Kross & Giust, 2019; Neri de Souza, Neri & Costa, 2016). A research question is defined as “... an unambiguous statement that clearly articulates the phenomenon you plan to investigate” (Kivunja, 2016, as cited in Kross & Giust, 2019, p. 24). In the same vein, Neri de Souza et al. (2016) argued that research questions must be detailed, germane to the area of knowledge, and not contain or suggest predetermined or set answers. Neri de Souza et al. (2016), supported by Barroga and Matanguihan (2022), further claimed that well-crafted research questions help investigators to have a good grasp of the research topic, the goals, objectives, and scope of the study as well as to discuss the findings and conclusions in a clear and focused manner.

The research questions a researcher asks and the way in which the questions are phrased will determine the study’s approach or the type of study to conduct (DeCarlo, 2018). Qualitative researchers mostly ask questions that start with the words ‘what’ and ‘why’ (Neri de Souza, 2016; Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022), because the research approach is interpretive in nature and researchers should, therefore, pose probing questions that encourage participants to share as many details as possible frankly about the problem investigated. The current study employed a qualitative research design and the researcher asked mostly questions that started with the word ‘what’ (Azungah, 2018; Rucker, 2015). Formulating the main research questions in this way enabled the researcher to understand how and why participants held specific views about the perceived overlapping programme accreditation functions of Namibia’s EQA bodies and their effect on higher education

institutions (Kross & Giust, 2019). DeCarlo (2018) believed qualitative research questions are more broad or generic in nature than exact or precise and attempt to delve deep into the beliefs, feelings, real-world experiences, perceptions, and anecdotes of participants. This study explored the perceived overlapping functions of Namibia's EQA bodies and their effect on higher education institutions, thus the researcher posed the types of questions that provided insight into the views, perceptions, and experiences of the selected participants at the EQA bodies and the higher education institutions about the phenomenon investigated. In addition, Neri de Souza et al. (2016) claimed that the research questions posed in a study become vital during the data analysis and discussion of findings phases; the triangulation of data; the development of categories, themes, and sub-themes; and the design of a schematic framework.

Unlike quantitative investigations that normally are based on hypotheses and relationships between variables (Barroga & Matanguihan, 2022), this study was not based on any hypothesis, because in a qualitative study “inquirers state research questions, not ... hypotheses (i.e. predictions that involve variables and statistical tests)” (Creswell, 2012, p. 129). Sprague, alike, argued that “in qualitative research, hypotheses are not tested ... hypotheses or ‘theories’ about social phenomena can ‘emerge’ from the research data and findings” (2012, para. 1). Furthermore, common advice given about the development and phrasing of research questions is to have a main research question(s) followed by secondary or sub-questions that speak to parts of the principal research question(s) (Kross & Giust, 2019). The following main research questions guided this investigation from which sub-questions were cascaded:

Q1. What functions are the NCHE, NQA, HPCNA, and ECN mandated to undertake as per their respective legislations?

Q2. What are the perceptions and views of the higher education institutions, the QAAs, and professional bodies as regards the seemingly overlapping functions?

Q3. How do the overlapping functions of the NCHE, NQA, HPCNA, and ECN affect Namibia's higher education institutions?

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the seemingly overlapping functions of Namibia's EQA bodies and their effect on higher education institutions. It particularly examined the programme accreditation functions, systems, and processes of the NQA, NCHE, HPCNA, and ECN and their likely effect on Namibia's higher education institutions. The investigation, therefore, focused on a common QA function, i.e. programme accreditation, performed by all four EQA bodies in Namibian higher education institutions.

This chapter is structured in five parts and concludes with a summary that reflects on some salient points that highlight how the literature review aided the need for this study. The first part of the chapter presents two conceptual frameworks commonly used in QA-related studies and that relate well with the scope of the current investigation. The first framework is the Conceptual Model of Quality proposed by Schindler, Puls-Elvidge, Welzant and Crawford (2015), which focuses on four main concepts of quality, i.e. quality as purposeful, quality as transformative, quality as exceptional, and quality as accountable (Elzagheid, 2019; Morales, 2019; Ryan, 2015). The second framework is the Deming Model of Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA Cycle), first developed by Dr William Edwards Deming in the 1950s. In addition, the discussion on the conceptual frameworks is followed by some key concepts and definitions such as quality, QA, EQA bodies, accreditation, and programme validation, which provide insight into the topic investigated as well as the conceptual models used.

The second part provides an overview of the perceptions and views of higher education institutions on the functions of EQA bodies. It describes some concerns about programme accreditation processes, i.e. evidence and documentation requirements, unsynchronised

accreditation periods, and lack of coordination among EQA bodies. This part also expands on positive points or suggested ways on how to deal with programme accreditation concerns such as effective communication; benchmarking; memoranda of understanding; institutional and national databases; and recognition of programmes accredited by other bodies. Furthermore, the experiences of EQA bodies regarding the accreditation or validation of programmes offered by higher education institutions are discussed in this part.

Part three presents the effects of EQA on higher education institutions with regards to inapt infringement on institutional autonomy; innovation; regulatory and financial burden; variation in the format and type of information required; and poorly prepared review panels, while part four explains the concepts of IQA and EQA, describes the impact of IQA on EQA and vice versa, and gives insight into the relationship between IQA and EQA.

Part five reports on the challenges of EQA concerning higher education institutions and EQA bodies as well as the benefits of EQA for higher education institutions, students, and the profession, including the public. Finally, a summary is provided to draw on the main points discussed in this chapter and to provide an overview of the literature that supported the need for the study as well as the challenges posed to different stakeholders in higher education that justified why it was necessary to undertake this investigation.

A wide and intensive literature review exercise was conducted, between 2019 and 2022, which started with an extensive search in ProQuest and Google Scholar. The search was then scaled down to higher education databases as well as the Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC), Elsevier and SAGE Journals, and Semantic Scholar. Furthermore, peer-reviewed journal articles and publications regarding professional QA networks in the region (e.g., the African Quality Assurance Network, Southern Africa Quality Assurance Network, and Inter-University

Council for East Africa) and beyond (e.g., the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education [INQAAHE] and the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education [ENQA]), were explored.

Conceptual Framework

This study was built around two conceptual frameworks commonly used in QA in higher education. The first framework is the Conceptual Model of Quality (Schindler et al., 2015) which focuses on four main concepts, i.e. quality as purposeful, quality as transformative, quality as exceptional, and quality as accountable (Elzagheid, 2019; Morales, 2019; Ryan, 2015). This conceptualisation of quality found its origin in a study conducted by Harvey and Green in 1993, which, according to Van der Bank and Popoola, is “the most influential empirical study, often quoted in the discussion on quality in higher education” (2014, p. 404). Gover and Loukkola (2018) concurred that these concepts are generally associated with the term quality in higher education, hence the researcher’s interest to explore their applicability in the chosen study.

In addition, the Deming Model of Plan-Do-Check-Act (Deming PDCA Cycle), first developed by Dr William Edwards Deming in the 1950s, was also adopted as a framework for this study. The use of the PDCA Cycle as a framework for QA in higher education is gaining increasing prominence in this sector (Asif & Raouf, 2013; Goubitz, 2011; Noda, Chi Hou, Shibu & Chou, 2018; Shokraiefard, 2011). As both frameworks are commonly used to assess and improve the standard of quality in higher education, the researcher attempted to combine the Conceptual Model of Quality with the PDCA Cycle, dubbed the PDCA Quality Conceptual Model, as a prototype to address the research problem (see Figure 4). The next section explains how the Conceptual Model of Quality applied to the research problem.

Conceptual Model of Quality

Quality as Purposeful

Adopted from Schindler et al. (2015), Morales defined quality as purposeful as “conformance to a stated mission/vision or a set of standards, including those defined by accrediting and/or regulatory bodies” (2019, p. 141). Gover and Loukkola (2018) reverberated this stance in their view that quality is something that fulfils a clear purpose or set of benchmarks. This conceptualisation of quality relates quality to fitness for purpose (Gamage, Pradeep, Najdanovic-Visak & Gunawardhana, 2020; Komotar, 2020; Matei & Iwinska, 2016; Soomro & Ahmad, 2012). According to Martin (2011), fitness for purpose refers to the rationale for the establishment of an institution; in other words, the principles, and beliefs of an institution and how this shape and fulfil its aims and objectives, promises and activities. Looking at the NQA, NCHE, HPCNA and ECN, each entity has been established with a distinct mandate and purpose, however, with a common overall function, i.e. assuring the quality of Namibia’s higher education system of which the accreditation of programmes is a prominent feature. Additionally, these EQA bodies have quality standards in place which higher education institutions mandatorily must comply with. In support of quality as fitness for purpose, Taber, Akdemir, Gorman, Van Zanten and Frank (2020) reasoned that this conceptualisation of quality could be appropriate for modifying diverse accreditation systems and practices to suit a particular context or purpose. In addition, it was advised that governments and line ministries should adjust EQA legislative frameworks, systems, and processes to ensure fitness for purpose (Gover & Loukkola, 2018).

Quality as Transformative

Speaking about quality as transformative, Schindler et al. claimed that it results in a “positive change in student learning ... personal and professional potential” (2015, p. 5). The

notion of quality as transformative can equally be applied to the functions, systems, and processes of EQA bodies (Elken & Stensaker, 2020) to assist higher education institutions to shape their internal quality management systems so that not only learning can be a positive and stimulating experience for students, but that teaching can also be an enriching experience for academics. Elken and Stensaker (2020) noted that EQA bodies should join the transformation journey to keep abreast of the rapidly changing environment in which higher education institutions operate. Gover and Loukkola (2018), who were involved in a project to identify the challenges that hamper the quality enhancement of higher education in Europe and proposed changes to be made, argued that it is imperative that EQA is structured in such a way that all stakeholders have a clear understanding of its intended goals and, most importantly, of what is expected of them to contribute in a constructive, reliable, and transparent manner to transforming processes within and between systems to the benefit of all role players. They believed unambiguous mandates are vital in building stakeholder confidence in EQA systems and processes (ibid.). Therefore, streamlining the functions of the EQA bodies may contribute to all role players (higher education institutions, students, EQAAs, professional bodies, the public and the government) having a common and clear understanding of the functions and purposes of the NQA, NCHE, HPCNA, and ECN and the value added to higher education through EQA processes. In addition, Kis (2005) asserted that the transformational notion of quality comprises elements of improvement and a drive to bring about progress and change in EQA and IQA systems. Thus, the EQA bodies should strive collectively, and in a harmonised fashion, to transform Namibia's higher education institutions such that they are able to augment IQA for the betterment of student learning, potential, and professional growth, including fostering the teaching experience of academics.

Quality as Exceptional

Looking at quality from an exceptional perspective implies the attainment of incomparable or high standards (ENQA, 2014; Gover & Loukkola, 2018; Schindler et al., 2015; Soomro & Ahmad, 2012). Having to fulfil the standards of various EQA bodies may bring higher education institutions to a point that compels them to ask, whose standards or why complying with multiple bodies' standards (Atibuni, 2020), because some of the EQA bodies only accredit one type of programme (professional qualifications), whereas the others accredit different types of programmes (professional, academic and VET qualifications), each with its distinctive criteria and understanding about QA (Makhoul, 2019; McCurry, 2018). Ayoo et al. (2020) were of the view that there should be mutual agreement about what QA entails to support higher education institutions to achieve exceptional standards and to nurture and strengthen mutual trust between higher education institutions and EQA bodies, and among EQA bodies themselves to make harmonisation easier.

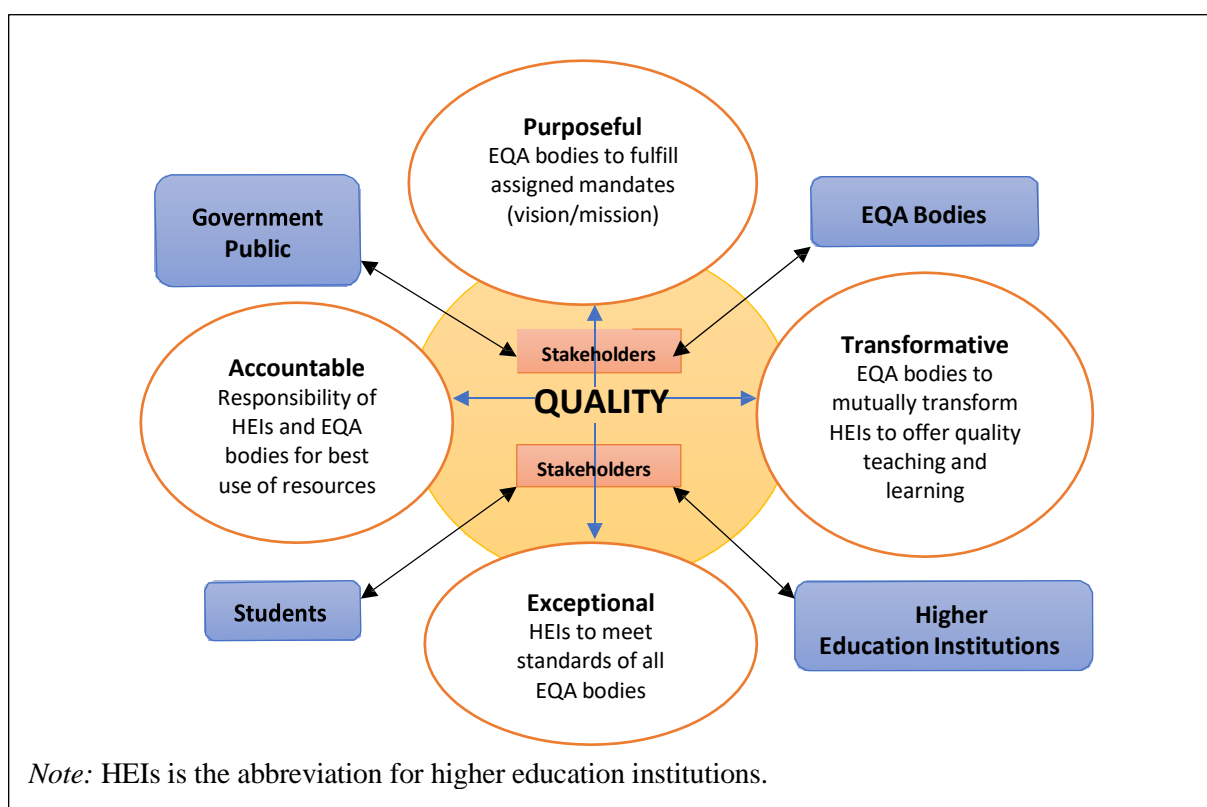
Quality as Accountable

This notion of quality holds higher education institutions “accountable to stakeholders for the optimal use of resources and the delivery of accurate educational products and services with zero defects” (Schindler et al., 2015, p. 5). However, Kis (2005) opposed this interpretation of quality because she believes that the goal of higher education institutions should not be to graduate perfect students who do not need further training and scaffolding in the workplace, as learning is a continuous process. In support of the latter argument, Swanzy and Potts (2017) reasoned that institutions should rather strive to ensure that they offer a quality education to their students and that that quality is upheld and continuously improved. The effects of the conceivable overlapping functions of these EQA bodies on Namibia's higher education institutions may pose a challenge

to the institutions to be kept responsible for continuously upholding and improving quality. Thus, looking at the accountability aspect of quality from a different angle, EQA bodies should be held equally accountable for the impact they have on higher education institutions' quality (Makhoul, 2019). Hence, there may be a need to revise the entire EQA system for higher education in Namibia. Figure 2 illustrates the conceptualisations of quality in higher education.

Figure 2

Conceptualisations of Quality in Higher Education



Note: Adapted from *Quality assurance in higher education: A practical handbook*, by Schindler et al., 2015, as cited in Matei & Iwinska, 2016, p. 16.

According to Figure 2, in the context of this study, the centre accentuates the importance of stakeholder engagement in the quality movement in higher education. Involving stakeholders

(EQA bodies, higher education institutions, students, government, and the public) in the quality discourse and soliciting their input is a vital aspect in crafting and reaching a consensus about a standard definition of quality (Bobby, 2014, as cited in Schindler et al., 2015) as well as designing quality criteria and procedures fit for purpose (AUC & EUC, 2018). Figure 2 further proposes how quality in higher education is conceived in the context of this study, i.e. if each EQA body has a clear mission that they adhere to and if they strive mutually and in a coordinated way to carry out their respective QA mandates in terms of the accreditation of programmes, it might contribute to the enhancement of the ability of higher education institutions to transform in a progressive way. The latter might empower them to attain exceptional quality and increase their chances to prove to stakeholders that resources are used optimally, and graduates fit for purpose enter the labour market. The following section discusses the Deming PDCA Cycle.

Deming Plan, Do, Check, and Act (PDCA) Cycle

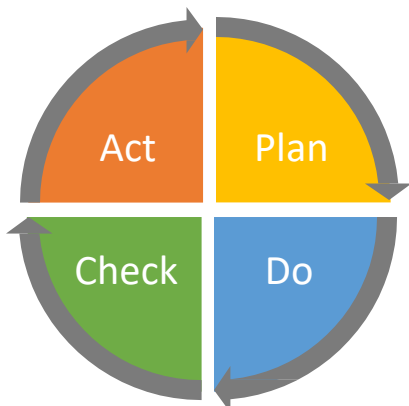
PDCA was originally designed as a repetitive strategy and administration technique used in industry for the control and continuous perfection of production processes to ensure a product of high quality is delivered (Chen, 2012; Mergen, Kepler, Silva & Cera, 2014; Tague, 2005). However, numerous studies reported that the PDCA Cycle can be successfully used to continuously enhance EQA systems and processes in higher education (Chen, 2012; Eby, 2019; Maruyama & Inoue, 2016; Mergen et al., 2014; Shokraiefard, 2011; Taguma, Gabriel & Lim, 2018). Patel and Deshpande (2017) claimed that the PDCA Cycle could be used effectively to solve matters of concern or problem areas, adapt to, and smoothly navigate through change processes, providing the assurance that plans of action are suitably verified prior to vowing to roll out the plan in full. Knight and Allen (2012) emphasised that the Deming PDCA Cycle necessitates its users to be dedicated and to assure constant communication among themselves and their

stakeholders. In addition, the American Society for Quality (n.d.) believed that the PDCA Cycle can be successfully used in research when preparing to gather and analyse data to confirm and give precedence to complicated issues or worrisome occurrences. Likewise, Sangpikul (2017) claimed that the PDCA cycle portrays key characteristics of action research. It is for these reasons that the researcher applied the Deming PDCA Cycle in this study. It allowed for dialogue with relevant stakeholders in Namibia's higher education sector regarding the seemingly overlapping programme accreditation functions, the possible effects these may have on higher education institutions, and the identification of likely interventions or mitigating strategies that could be considered to improve the situation.

As a continuous quality enhancement technique, the Deming PDCA Cycle (Figure 3) proposes four main phases to enhance quality, namely planning, doing, checking, and acting. Rahim, Utsha, Bhuiyan and Miah (2019) claimed that it is essential to pass through all four phases, from identifying the problem to resolving the problem, to ultimately be content with the outcome.

Figure 3

Deming PDCA Cycle



Planning

In the planning phase, one needs to describe the aims, goals, and objectives of an institution; identify the problem; and try to find potential reasons for the identified problem (Rahim et al., 2019). Knight and Allen (2012) posited that planning entails describing the organisation's intentions, strategies, and what it is aiming for. According to Shokraiefard (2011), supported by Rahim et al. (2019), there must be a plan or approach in place for improvement by identifying the problems and proposing suitable ways for change. Furthermore, Taguma et al. (2018) held the view that during the planning phase it is important to do an overall investigation and assessment of the entire system in which the problem was detected to determine the origin thereof and propose alternative practices for improvement. Thus, the researcher studied the objects (fitness for purpose) and functions of the EQA bodies as per their respective legislations to identify the perceived overlaps pertaining to programme accreditation, and subsequently make recommendations for improvement. This study also explored the participants' understanding of the functions of the EQA bodies through individual semi-structured interviews to establish how they perceive the mandates of the NQA, NCHE, HPCNA, and ECN. In addition, according to Patel and Deshpande (2017), a plan of action could be designed already in the planning phase once recommendations for improvement have been developed.

Doing

According to Taguma et al. (2018), this phase requires undertaking activities to gather information or data about the problem that has been pointed out by involving small groups of stakeholders. In the case of this investigation, a case study design was used to obtain data through individual interviews from people who have knowledge and experience in QA in higher education. Doing entails pinpointing if there is a need for change and subsequently implementing proposed

modifications to bring about the desired transformation for value-addition (Knight & Allen, 2012; McLean, 2017; Shokraiefard, 2011). Exploring the views and perceptions of the higher education institutions and the EQA bodies as regards the seemingly overlapping programme accreditation functions and the effect they have on Namibia's higher education institutions indicated a need to transform Namibia's EQA system for higher education. According to Gover and Loukkola (2018), the restructuring of EQA systems is a common occurrence worldwide and the latter often results from a call by the public, including higher education institutions, students, and EQA bodies to modify and improve existing systems to eliminate any repetitious practices and so ensure they remain fit for their intended purpose. Patel and Deshpande (2017) advised that this phase requires that the stakeholders who will be mostly affected by the agreed resolutions should be supported by the change agents to assure that they fully comprehend and honour the solutions.

During the doing phase, the accountability aspect of quality was explored, i.e. the views of the higher education institutions about who should take the accountability of upholding quality if institutions must meet the standards of all these EQA bodies. The researcher proposed a plan of action that will hopefully aid in streamlining EQA processes and simultaneously heighten the quality of Namibia's higher education system; and a collective approach among stakeholders is vital. The proposed plan of action may call for policy reviews and/or new policy development, which could streamline and transform Namibia's programme accreditation systems and processes for higher education in a positive way.

Checking

This involves the need to determine the differences between baseline and fresh data or to "compare old and new data" (Knight & Allen, 2012, p. 68), assess and question, make links, and draw conclusions to establish the impact of mitigation strategies and whether they produced the

expected improvement (Taguma et al., 2018). Essential questions to be considered during the checking phase are what lessons were learnt, did anything go wrong that requires corrective action, and how the outcomes compare to anticipated results (ibid.). Patel and Deshpande (2017) claimed that the implementation of mitigation strategies or action plans would be a valuable learning curve for those involved in the implementation thereof. They further suggested that improvement plans based on lessons learnt and new knowledge generated could be developed, through alliances during the checking phase, to strengthen implementation and take it to the next level (ibid.). Furthermore, checking implies ongoing monitoring of the outcomes of continuous quality improvement to ensure exceptional standards are maintained and their impact assessed to identify other potential challenges (Shokraiefard, 2011). Going forward, continuous monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the proposed interventions for this study should be the responsibility of the identified stakeholders in higher education (plan of action as depicted in Figure 14).

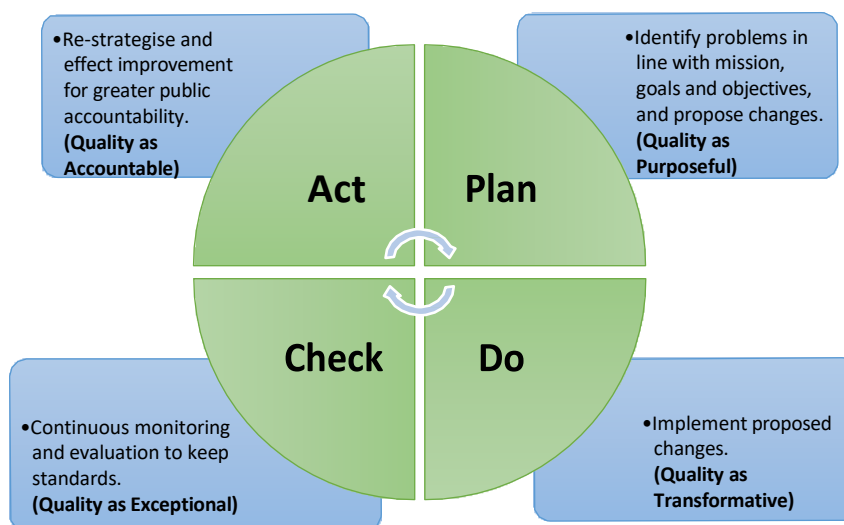
Acting

This phase normally focuses on lessons learnt in the monitoring and evaluation (checking) period, and how things can be done better than what was proposed (Taguma et al., 2018), which would result in starting with the planning phase again. Knight and Allen (2012) believed acting offers an opportune time to re-strategise, take corrective action, and further improve systems and operating procedures. It is imperative that the actions taken and the changes to be implemented should involve everyone who is going to be affected by the corrective actions (Beerkins, 2015; Shokraiefard, 2011). Due to the continuous improvement nature of the PDCA Cycle, a series of cycles should be scheduled to contextualise transformation that will yield the desired deliverables (Taguma et al., 2018).

Figure 4 demonstrates an integration of the PDCA Cycle and the Conceptual Model of Quality (i.e. the PDCA Quality Conceptual Model), and how it was applied to the study.

Figure 4

The PDCA Quality Conceptual Model



Note: Adapted from *Using PDCA as a general framework for teaching and evaluating the learning of software engineering disciplines*, by Mergen et al., 2014, p. 3.

Figure 4 implies an integration of the two conceptual frameworks applied in the study where the four phases in the Deming PDCA Cycle are implemented in tandem with the four conceptualisations of quality to propose a plan of action that could assist relevant government authorities, the EQA bodies and other key stakeholders in higher education to streamline their functions pertaining to programme accreditation.

As part of the conceptual framework, the researcher deemed it imperative to define key concepts that are embedded in the QA dialect and to simultaneously provide a basis for the discussions in this study.

Key Concepts and Definitions

Quality

According to the National Assessment and Accreditation Council, the notion of quality “is a 20th century phenomenon that has its roots in the industry and management” (2006, p. 15), but this concept gained prominence in higher education when governments became concerned about the purpose of higher education and the value of the educational experience for students (Blanco, 2019; National Association of System Heads, 2019; Noda et al., 2018). Attempts to define quality in the higher education context dates back 30 years (three decades) in a study conducted by Harvey and Green. In Harvey and Green’s (1993) study, they described how various stakeholders in higher education (EQA bodies, higher education institutions, students, industry [employers and employees] and the government) perceive the concept of quality.

Explaining the concept of quality in higher education, Harvey and Green (1993) looked at it from five slants: quality as exceptional (excellent/surpassing standards), as perfection (consistency/attaining standards), as fitness for purpose (purposeful/based on the mission of higher education institutions), as value for money (accountability from higher education), and as transformative (Dicker, Garcia, Kelly & Mulrooney, 2018; European Centre for Strategic Management of Universities [ESMU], 2008; Van der Bank & Popoola, 2014; Van Kemenade, Pupius & Hardjono, 2008). Over the years, Harvey and Green’s elucidation of quality in higher education has become a domestic name in the quality discourse in this sector. A definition hunt on ProQuest for the concept quality in higher education, delivered about 10,000 results. Numerous scholars (Elzagheid, 2019; ENQA, 2014; Gamage et al., 2020; Giuffré & Ratto, 2013; Gover & Loukkola, 2018; Kis, 2005; Morales, 2019; Ryan, 2015; Schindler et al., 2015; Soomro & Ahmad, 2012; Swanzy & Potts, 2017; Van der Bank & Popoola, 2014; Van Kemenade et al., 2008)

habitually cited, adopted or adapted Harvey and Green's conceptualisation (extensive definition) of quality in their discussions on quality in higher education. Furthermore, Nabaho, Aguti and Joseph (2017) reported that emphasis was placed on quality as transformative, quality as fitness for purpose and quality as exceptional, in a qualitative study they have conducted on the perceptions of academics on quality in higher education in Uganda. In addition, Komotar claimed that the idea of quality as fitness for purpose is "one of the most widely accepted definitions of quality ... but at the same time, it puts emphasis on the achievement of minimum standards" (2020, p. 80).

Nevertheless, it is reasoned that it is not a simple task to define quality or to reach consensus about a workable definition for quality in higher education (Gamage et al., 2020; Gover & Loukkola, 2018; Komotar, 2020; Nabaho et al., 2017; Njiro, 2016). Despite the lack of agreement, it is vital to define quality in higher education, because stakeholders must be acquainted with what the concept entails to decide how to assure and enhance it (Gover & Loukkola, 2018; Njiro, 2016). ESIB defined quality as "an ongoing process ensuring the delivery of agreed standards. These agreed standards should ensure that every educational institution where quality is assured has the potential to achieve a high quality of content and results" (2002, p. 7).

Viewing quality in a context of diversity, the Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST) described it as "the capacity of an institution or programme to answer to external expectations and internal purposes and goals, organising its processes in a consistent way to achieve the expected outcomes" (2020b, p. 6). In addition, Giuffre and Ratto embraced the fitness for purpose perspective of quality, describing quality in higher education "as the degree of fit between the actions that an institution ... launched to comply with the guidelines issued from [its] mission and the institutional goals, and the results obtained by these actions" (2013, p. 31).

This description of quality in higher education aligns with how NUST defines it. However, the crux is that all three definitions encompass one or more elements of Harvey and Green's conceptualisation of quality in higher education.

Quality Assurance

Komotar (2020) believed the idea of QA was born from the concept of quality because of the wide acceptance the definition of quality as fitness for purpose gained. Fitness for purpose is mentioned in the same breath as meeting minimum standards (Komotar, 2020) or honouring one's commitment or pledge (ESMU, 2008). QA is also viewed as an organised and continual practice that makes quality the focus point in the activities of institutions to ensure the enhancement of the quality of their academic offerings (Van der Bank & Popoola, 2014). Van der Bank and Popoola's definition of QA in higher education resonates with Komotar's view of this concept, because all three authors were of the view that to quality assure higher education, the emphasis should be placed primarily on quality and the improvement thereof. Essentially, QA demands accountability (answerability to the public) and pellucidity (transparency) from higher education institutions, including the continuous improvement of quality (Friedman et al., 2017; Gover & Loukkola, 2018).

With so many EQA bodies in the country, Namibian higher education institutions may become overwhelmed in their endeavour to meet minimum quality standards, and this may influence their efforts to respond to the public's call for accountability. Furthermore, ESIB (2002) stated that QA is visible in an institution if that institution can continuously demonstrate with confidence that quality standards are retained for the improvement of the education students receive. Moreover, QA is described as the policies, systems, processes (including accreditation, evaluation, and audit), approaches and actions higher education institutions and EQA bodies have

in place to guarantee that internal and external quality is being upheld and improved (AUC & EUC, 2018; Komotar, 2020). Furthermore, Atibuni (2020), who has investigated the autonomy and interdependence of higher education quality assurance mechanisms in Africa, underscored the doctrines of QA as higher education institutions that should be the custodians of QA, foster an IQA culture, and protect the public's interest in the quality of higher education, while EQA bodies should be transparent and draw on the expertise of external reviewers to conduct programme accreditation exercises.

IQA activities are conducted by higher education institutions to guarantee the quality of the education they offer and EQA are performed by EQA bodies at higher education institutions. The two concepts are believed to be related and are discussed in further detail later in the chapter.

External Quality Assurance Bodies

In Namibia, EQA bodies are classified into EQAAs (NQA and NCHE) and professional bodies (HPCNA and ECN). EQA bodies supervise and evaluate the quality in higher education at institutional and/or programme level (European Union, 2021; Okae-Adjei, 2016). In some countries, such as Namibia, EQAAs quality assure all types of programmes, i.e. academic and professional, and even VET programmes (NCHE, 2009).

Accreditation

Accreditation is an activity carried out under the QA umbrella and can be conducted at programme and/or institutional level (Frank, Taber, Van Zanten, Scheele & Blouin, 2020; Hegji, 2020; Hoxhaj & Hysa, 2015; Ince & Gounko, 2014; Komotar, 2020; Matei & Iwinska, 2016). Accreditation is classified as an EQA activity whereby an approved EQA body assesses the quality of a higher education institution's study programme or the institution itself to confirm or prove that agreed criteria are met (QAA, 2018; University Quality Assurance International Board

[UQAIB], 2016). Matei and Iwinska (2016) related accreditation to the notion of accountability, where it inspects, examines, and guarantees if higher education programmes are meeting the agreed accreditation criteria or benchmarks.

Functions of Accreditation. Since this study focused on the programme accreditation function of the identified EQA bodies, it was rather important to highlight some of the functions of accreditation as summarised by Hegji (2020), and Matei and Iwinska (2016):

- Evaluating and validating the quality of academic and professional programmes at higher education institutions.
- Supporting higher education institutions to build a quality ethos stimulated by continuous enhancement.
- Encouraging higher education institutions to embrace good QA practices.
- Motivating the entire campus community (executive management, academic and administrative staff, and students) to adopt a collaborative approach in the development, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of QA activities.
- Establishing benchmarks for programme accreditation and for the continuous improvement of the development and review of programmes.

Accreditation Process. The process of accreditation takes place to certify that an academic programme or provider in higher education “meets a certain standard, which may be either a minimum standard, or a standard of excellence” (Hoxhaj & Hysa, 2015, p. 247). This description of the accreditation process contains some concomitant features of quality, like quality as fitness for purpose and quality as exceptional/excellence (Komotar, 2020), which shows the interrelated nature of these concepts, and that quality enhancement in higher education hinges on improvement-oriented activities such as accreditation (De Paor, 2016; Engineering Council of the

United Kingdom, 2014; Makhoul, 2019). The accreditation process typically involves a self-evaluation/assessment by higher education institutions, site visit by a review/audit panel and a report detailing the outcome of the exercise (Al-Eyadhy & Alenez, 2021; Ayoo et al., 2020). The outcome of a programme accreditation exercise normally culminates in a pronouncement from the EQA body to grant the programme accreditation status, conditional accreditation status, or repudiate accreditation (Al-Eyadhy & Alenez, 2021; CHE, 2021; International Institute for Educational Planning [IIEP], 2020a; NCHE, 2009).

It should be noted that each EQA body has its own distinctive accreditation procedures, but in essence, they apply a generic approach when conducting programme accreditation (McCurry, 2018). IIEP (2020b) and others (Cirlan & Loukkola, 2021; ENQA, 2015; INQAAHE, 2007; Martin, 2016; Martin & Stella, 2007) supported this view. Figure 5 presents the main accreditation process in Namibian higher education institutions.

Figure 5

Accreditation Process



Self-evaluation by Higher Education Institutions. The accreditation process commences with a self-evaluation and critical self-reflection of the programme against set QA

standards and criteria of the EQA body, which culminates in the self-evaluation report (CHE, 2021; IIEP, 2020a; Martin, 2016; Martin & Stella, 2007; McCurry, 2018; NCHE, 2009; NQA, 2006). Some of the generic QA standards and criteria used in the accreditation of study programmes are: governance, leadership and management; institutional beliefs and good practices; aspects related to the curriculum; teaching, learning and assessment; staff; student support and progression; infrastructure; teaching and learning facilities and resources; research and innovations; and stakeholder collaborations, among other (IIEP, 2020a; Manimala et al., 2020; Matei & Iwinska, 2016; NCHE, 2009; NQA, 2006).

According to the CHE (2021), supported by Ayoo et al. (2020), institutions should regard the self-evaluation exercise as an opportunity to detect challenges, weaknesses, and strengths, and to make sense of how a programme is performing in relation to a particular standard. It is equally important that all staff teaching in a programme that is submitted for accreditation, should be involved in the development of the self-evaluation report (American Board for Accreditation in Psychoanalysis, 2014; Halstead, 2019). The IIEP claimed that “the extent to which self-assessment serves to evaluate may vary” (2020a, p. 7) between EQAAs (NCHE and NQA) and professional bodies (ECN and HPCNA). In many instances, professional bodies only require higher education institutions to furnish them with certain information that they regard important for the validation of the programme or to complete a self-assessment tool or questionnaire, thus institutions need not produce a self-evaluation report per se (IIEP, 2020a).

Review Panel Site Visit. Before the site visit takes place, the EQA body appoints external reviewers or peers (IIEP, 2020a) in consultation with the institution that submitted a programme(s) for accreditation (CHE, 2021; Manimala et al., 2020). The panel then evaluates the self-evaluation report against the QA standards or criteria and validates the claims through studying evidence

documents relevant to the offering of the programme, interviewing various groups of internal stakeholders of the higher education institution, and conducting a tour of the facilities (De Paor, 2016; IIEP, 2020a; Manimala et al., 2020; McCurry, 2018; Pasadena City College, 2015).

Palmer contended that the site visit by the review panel is important because it accords higher education institutions a chance to take a moment, deliberate and reflect on the performance of the programme as well as “how [to] measure that ... students demonstrate knowledge and competencies” (2018, p. 101). However, controversies about the value that review panels add to the accreditation process have been reported (IIEP, 2020a; Ryan, 2015).

Compilation of the Accreditation Report. The site visit is concluded with a report compiled by the review panel. The accreditation or validation report ordinarily hinges on the self-evaluation report and the findings that emanated from the stakeholders’ interviews, documents consulted and viewing of the facilities that support the offering of the programme(s) (De Paor, 2016; IIEP, 2020a; Manimala et al., 2020; McCurry, 2018; Pasadena City College, 2015).

Final Decision on the Accreditation Outcome. The final decision on whether to grant the programme(s) accreditation status or not rests with the EQA body after consideration of the review panel report (CHE, 2021; IIEP, 2020a; Manimala et al., 2020). According to IIEP (2020a), another important component of the accreditation process is to publish the accreditation outcome. “However, the extent of such disclosure varies. It may go from disclosure of only the final outcome, as in the case of a typical accreditation, to disclosure of the full assessment report, as in the case of a typical audit.” (IIEP, 2020a, p. 10) Whereas the NCHE publishes a summary of the accreditation report on its website (NCHE, 2009), the other three EQA bodies only publish a list of accredited programmes on their websites. Furthermore, the accreditation outcome is normally valid for a specified period, e.g., five to 10 years (IIEP, 2020a; Matei & Iwinska, 2016). In

Namibia, the period for which the accreditation outcome is valid, varies between three and six years (NCHE, 2009; NQA, 2006).

Across the globe and Namibia alike, EQA bodies engage in similar programme accreditation processes, but each body has its own requirements in terms of the format of the self-evaluation, number of experts to be included in the review panel, length of the site visit, stakeholders to be invited for interviews, facilities to be viewed, and the type of evidence they would want to see (Martin, 2007; NCHE, 2009). Manimala et al. caution against “isolated evaluations even for specialized programmes” (2020, p. 11). To address the latter concern, the NCHE has signed memoranda of understanding (MoUs) with the NQA and some professional bodies for cooperation in joint accreditation, among other (NCHE, 2019b). Manimala et al. noted that such collaborations may “minimize the burden of accreditation (in terms of the size of the visiting team, duration of visit, amount of data required, etc.)” (2020, p. 11).

Programme Validation

A professional body generally conducts programme validation, and the concept is often used interchangeably with programme accreditation or programme approval (Harvey, 2004-2020; Ibrahim, 2014; QAA, 2018). It is described as “a formal process through which a degree-awarding body decides that a programme of study (content, teaching/learning and assessment) is of appropriate standard and quality to lead to one of its qualifications” (QAA, 2018, p. 27). On the contrary, the UQAIB (2016) distinguished programme validation from programme approval. According to the UQAIB (2016), programme validation is an EQA process conducted to guarantee the public that the quality of a programme offered by foreign providers is not inferior to the same programme offered in their home countries. With reference to this study, programme validation denotes professional accreditation, or the accreditation of professional study programmes offered

by higher education institutions, aiming at supplying graduates who can apply their specialised skills in their line of work (De Paor, 2016). The term programme validation is also used interchangeably with programme accreditation in this study.

The following section presents the functions of EQA bodies as well as some overlaps in their functions pertaining to the accreditation and validation of programmes in higher education institutions.

Functions of External Quality Assurance Bodies

Nabaho, Turyasingura, Kiiza, Andama and Beinebyabo (2020) argued that Africa's agenda to achieve an integrated continental higher education system is jeopardised by the varied systems each sub-region and country are operating in their respective higher education spaces. Many countries have experienced a proliferation of EQA bodies with diverse requirements for both academic and specialised programmes, and this situation put pressure on higher education institutions to meet the standards of all these bodies (Garwe, 2019). While it is argued that it is not unusual for countries to have more than one EQA body, a warning is signalled that care should be taken concerning probable overlaps in the mandates and roles of these bodies (Chalmers, 2008; Friedman et al., 2017; IIEP, 2020b) to avoid situations like the one the Namibian higher education sector is facing. Such situation may result in a duplication of functions, as the agencies mostly have the same QA requirements (Kis, 2005). What is more, in a study conducted by Imaniriho (2020), who investigated the approaches, realities, challenges, and collaborations in QA in higher education institutions in Rwanda, it was reported that there is a general intersection and duplication of the functions that EQAAs and professional bodies are mandated to perform, which resulted in frequent clashes between these bodies. Hence, professional bodies preferred to operate as

autonomous entities even though it cost them to forfeit government subsidies, which further strained their capacity to perform their functions efficiently and effectively (ibid.).

Garwe and Gwati (2018) noted that while EQA bodies mainly serve a similar purpose, they run their affairs differently in terms of level of competence and dedication, and financial stability. Hence, harmonisation of these bodies and their respective legislations, policies and procedures is regarded critical to encourage and ensure liability and limpidity, value for money and participation in national QA initiatives (Nabaho et al., 2020). Though there are calls for harmonisation among EQA bodies, ENQA (2012) claimed that it is not an unusual phenomenon in the global higher education sector for these bodies to merge, because such practices bring about increased efficiency and effectiveness in countries' EQA and IQA systems. In other situations, where the functions of EQA bodies overlapped, these bodies were restructured, as reported by Bailey (2015). For instance, from a sub-regional level, good examples can be drawn from Botswana and Zimbabwe that also had similar challenges as Namibia, where multiple EQAAs were established to oversee QA in higher education. However, these bodies were later integrated to have harmonised EQA processes.

The Botswana Tertiary Education Council (BTEC) was assigned the role of quality assuring tertiary education; the Botswana Training Authority (BOTA) quality assured and coordinated the development of VET in the country; and the Botswana Qualifications Authority (BQA) was responsible for developing and managing the National Credit and Qualifications Framework, and to assure the quality of education, training and skills development at all levels of the country's education system (Bailey & Chirwa, 2014; Botswana Qualifications Authority Act, 2013; Molutsi, 2009). The existence of the three EQAAs in Botswana caused fragmentation and a lack of coordination in assuring the quality of the higher education system (University World

News, 2008). There was also a perception that there was no clear demarcation between the roles of BOTA and the BTEC (“BOTA, TEC Merger Long Overdue,” 2009), which led to the repeal of the legislations that established these two bodies (“BOTA and TEC finalise organisation restructuring,” 2013). Subsequently, the BTEC was replaced by the Human Resources Development Council, and BOTA was integrated into the BQA (Bailey & Chirwa, 2014). The BQA is now responsible for developing and maintaining the National Credit and Qualifications Framework, and to coordinate and assure the quality of education, training, and skills development at all levels of the country’s education system, i.e. accrediting study programmes, registering, and auditing providers of education and training, and developing and revising QA standards, among other (Botswana Qualifications Authority Act, 2013).

In the case of Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZimCHE) replaced the National Council for Higher Education and is recognised as the competent authority in Zimbabwe that registers providers of higher education, audits higher education institutions, and conducts programme accreditation (Garwe, 2014; ZimCHE, 2018). The Zimbabwe NQF is governed jointly by the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Science and Technology Development (MHTESTD), and the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MHTESTD, 2018). However, the process of creating the Zimbabwe National Qualifications Authority was set in motion through the Zimbabwe NQF (MHTESTD, 2019).

As this study focussed on the overlapping functions of the NQA, NCHE, HPCNA and ECN, it was imperative to zoom in on these bodies’ respective mandates (Table 1) pertaining to assuring the quality of higher education programmes in Namibia.

Table 1

Functions of the EQA Bodies in Assuring the Quality of Higher Education Programmes

NQA	NCHE	HPCNA	ECN
<p>The NQA:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Establishes and manages the NQF. - Develops curriculum and occupational standards. - Accredits the capacity of individuals or organisations to offer a training course(es) and evaluates their performance to offer the specified course(es), or that such course(es) adheres to the curriculum and occupational standards for that particular course(es) set by the NQA (NQA Act 1996). 	<p>The NCHE:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Accredits, in agreement with the NQA, higher education programmes of study. - Monitors the QA systems and tools developed and implemented by providers of higher education and training (Higher Education Act 2003). 	<p>The HPCNA:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Governs and approves education and training related to the medical, nursing, pharmaceutical and dental professions in Namibia. - Approves education and training providers or individuals that consider offering education or training in the medical, nursing, pharmaceutical and dental fields as per the requirements and guidelines of the Council (HPCNA Act 2004). 	<p>The ECN:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Depending on the laws of Namibia, develops, benchmarks, and administers standards for engineering programmes. - Develops the criteria professional evaluators must use in assessing, accrediting and certifying engineering programmes of study and qualifications, including qualifications to be used in Namibia, obtained inside and outside the country (ECN, 2023).

According to Table 1, programme accreditation or validation and institutional audits or accreditation are basically the main QA functions that these EQA bodies fulfil (Ibrahim, 2014; McCurry, 2018). For instance, according to the Higher Education Act (2003), the NCHE accredits programmes in concurrence with the NQA, though the meaning of the term concurrence is not always clear.

However, although the NQA also conducts institutional accreditation, it has as its core functions the registration of qualifications on the NQF as well as the evaluation of qualifications (NQA, 2007; NQA, 2006; NQA Act 1996). Castel-Branco (2022) found that national qualifications authorities are mainly charged with NQF related functions and institutional

accreditation, in an exercise conducted to map the qualifications frameworks of twelve countries in Africa. In addition, national qualifications frameworks give the public information regarding the equivalence of study programmes and qualifications taught at different levels of the NQF as well as coordinate the recognition of knowledge and competencies attained through various means of education (Ayoo et al., 2020). In their study conducted to compare and evaluate the status and practices of QA in higher education in Africa, Ayoo et al. (2020) found that functions related to national qualifications frameworks were not necessarily carried out by a designated qualifications authority (such as the NQA), but such functions reside under the jurisdiction of different entities in different countries, e.g., either EQAAs, autonomous institutions, departments within the government or independent state-owned enterprises under the Ministry of Education. Castel-Branco (2022) echoed this finding. Nevertheless, as stated earlier, this study focussed only on the accreditation or validation of programmes.

Professional bodies, on the other hand, are standard-setting and regulatory organisations, directing the undertakings of specific professions; looking after the interests of their affiliates; authorising admittance into specific professions; and granting accreditation, validation, approval or recognition to particular programmes leading to the applicable professional qualifications (Allied Health Professions Act, 2004; Engineering Profession Amendment Act, 1991; The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education [QAA], 2018). Globally, a shift was reported among professional bodies, from input-based accreditation that focused on the contents of the curriculum to output-based accreditation that focuses on the competencies and skills that students can master (Ibrahim, 2014; Qadir, Shafi, Al-Fuqaha, Taha, Yau, Ponciano, Hussain, Imran, Sheikh Muhammad, Rais, Rashid & Tan, 2020).

As is the case with their regional and international counterparts, the Namibian EQA bodies also perform other administrative, coordination and decision-making functions that by nature form an integral part of their EQA processes (Hegji, 2020; IIEP, 2020c; Kis, 2005). For example, administrative tasks include regular communication with higher education institutions, searching for and appointing review panel members, and creating a database of experts; while the coordination functions comprise activities such as the orientation and preparation of review panels for accreditation, audits and validations, and guidance to higher education institutions on the self-evaluation process through training workshops or meetings (IIEP, 2020c). Some of the administrative and coordination functions may inform the decision-making functions directly, e.g., hiring, orienting, and training of experts, and guiding higher education institutions through the self-evaluation exercise (*ibid.*). In addition, Atibuni (2020) suggested more functions of EQA bodies, i.e. arranging workshops and training programmes to build the capacity of higher education institutions in QA, working in close cooperation with institutions on programme accreditation processes and site inspections, and handling appeals submitted by higher education institutions.

Shindi argued that the overlapping mandates of EQA bodies inexorably result in “an inefficient use of resources, and harms their credibility, accountability and effectiveness” (2018, p. 21). He further claimed that the perceived intersecting functions create misperceptions and contribute to decreased limpidity among higher education institutions and other stakeholders (*ibid.*). In a study carried out by Hernández-Fernández, Pérez-Durán and Portugal-Celaya (2021) on how QA regulatory systems have developed in higher education in Mexico, the different structures that exist and QA tools and policies used by EQA bodies, it was found that while EQA bodies need to complement and enhance each other’s roles and functions, they instead often just duplicate each other. Moreover, Waheed (2018) accentuated that higher education institutions may

be tempted to doubt QA standards and processes if these are not explained clearly, made known publicly and opened for stakeholders' input. Hence, EQA bodies ought to "... publish their objectives and activities, scope of work, expertise; and interaction with HEIs and other stakeholders" (AUC & EUC, 2018, p. 31).

Friedman et al. (2017) investigated the accreditation processes applied by EQA bodies in Irish higher education institutions and reported that:

... HEI personnel have anecdotally noted the dual demands of accreditation and evaluation of QA as a duplication of resource demands. While others have suggested that single programmes can require accreditation from more than one professional body ... some have also noted that approaches and terminology are less than integrated and sometimes clash, potentially undermining professional body standing. Different terms and jargon can in effect result in misinterpretation. (p. 8)

Shindi (2018) reasoned that such situation provides opportunities for the review of EQA policies and systems to streamline accreditation practices and procedures of EQA bodies in Namibia. In the same vein, in a study commissioned by the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training on programme accreditation practices by professional and other accrediting bodies in Australian higher education institutions, it was reported that institutions besought the rationalisation of accreditation processes applied by professional and accrediting bodies (PhillipsKPA, 2017). The institutions acknowledged that the QA requirements for some programmes might be unique, especially as far as professional programmes are concerned, but issues of a generic nature, like governance and QA, could be alike for EQA bodies, where possible (ibid.). Proponents of single-tier national QA systems are of the opinion that such arrangements heighten opportunities for the integration of QA policies, systems and procedures and could

augment uniformity, effectiveness, and efficiency in the execution of assigned roles and functions (King, 2007; Waheed, 2018).

The report of the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training highlights some of the issues universities grapple with due to the overlapping functions of EQA bodies, which result in a duplication of efforts, i.e. evidence and documentation requirements, unsynchronised accreditation periods, and lack of coordination among EQA bodies (PhillipsKPA, 2017).

Issues Universities Grapple with Due to Overlapping Functions

Evidence and Documentation Requirements. As a norm, all EQA systems are evidence-based, thus institutions are required to submit relevant information and documentation (e.g., programme-specific documents, and institutional policies, systems, rules, and guidelines) used to validate claims made in self-evaluation reports and interviews conducted with institutional stakeholders (Beerkens, 2018; CHE, 2012; IIEP, 2020a; Liu, Tan & Meng, 2015; Martin, 2016). Likewise, the QA system of the NCHE, Namibia, overtly stipulates that it is evidence-based (NCHE, 2009). The submission of piles of evidence documents is reported to cause a secretarial encumbrance for higher education institutions because with every accreditation exercise conducted by each EQA body, institutions must prepare evidence files to be viewed and studied by review panels (Australian Physiotherapy Council, 2019). In addition, it was reported that higher education institutions are sometimes required to submit relatively static statistical data (e.g., staffing numbers, student enrolment figures, etc.) to EQA bodies on an annual basis, but should then again provide the same statistics when a programme(s) is due for re-accreditation (PhillipsKPA, 2017). Kis echoed the view that “multiple agencies impose an excessive load on higher education institutions” (2005, p. 14).

Moreover, Garwe (2019) reckoned that document-preparation, including other logistical arrangements for EQA, is time-consuming and costly. Another concern raised is “evaluation fatigue” (Huang, 2017), resulting from higher education institutions working non-stop to satisfy the documentation requirements and complex QA processes of multiple bodies. However, the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (2019) argued that the presentation of information and evidence documents is not subject to a prescriptive format and even if review panels request for additional documents, it is done within limits.

Unsynchronised Accreditation Periods. Killian reasoned that higher education institutions “... have double costs, double reviews, double administrative oversight [and] double time of the administrators ...” (2023, para. 32) because EQA bodies have different accreditation cycles. According to PhillipsKPA (2017), EQA bodies do not seem eager to align their accreditation cycles nor to conduct these processes concurrently, increasing the pressure and fatigue for higher education institutions caused by the preparations associated with programme accreditation conducted by multiple bodies. On the other hand, alignment between EQA bodies’ QA approaches was flagged as a possibility to increase accreditation effectiveness, in a study conducted by Friedman et al. (2017).

Lack of Coordination among EQA Bodies. Martin (2007) held the view that there is a dearth of consistency among national EQA bodies because of the intricate nature of higher education policies and systems. Garwe claimed that “regulatory bodies often work in an uncoordinated fashion, thereby frustrating higher education institutions’ effort” (2019, p. 4). For example, occurrences where EQAAs accredit specialised or professional programmes, which are afterwards not approved by professional bodies, were reported (Garwe, 2019). She reported about instances where the ZimCHE granted accreditation status to degrees that were rejected by

professional bodies; graduates of these degrees were then also affected negatively. At Namibia's first conference in QA in higher education, concern was raised concerning the fragmented approach applied by different review panels and isolated programme accreditation practices that may decrease "credibility in the accreditation if the outcomes are different, thus QAAs and professional bodies should streamline and harmonise their QA processes, and do joint accreditation" (NCHE, 2019a, p. 21).

Closer working relations between EQA bodies might motivate them to harmonise their efforts, hence attempts should be made to synchronise QA practises and share pools of expertise to minimise duplication (Friedman et al., 2017; PhillipsKPA, 2017). In support of the latter, Vaht (2008) suggested that collaboration among EQA bodies ought to be supported so that a shared QA approach in higher education is adopted, and information and good practices are shared to ultimately create a coordinated system that will strengthen mutual recognition and trust among higher education stakeholders. In the same vein, the AUC and EUC (2018) called for greater cooperation between EQAAs and professional bodies in accreditation, including the sharing of trustworthy information on QA related matters that are readily available to all role players in the field. Furthermore, Waheed (2018) held the view that increased stakeholder collaborations especially between EQA bodies and higher education institutions might contribute to an improved quality ethos at institutional level as well as at the level of the accrediting body.

Ayoo et al. (2020) were of the view that regular reviews and improvement of EQA systems might contribute to harmonising EQA processes, while Atibuni (2020) suggested that the use of technology may be a good move to bring about better coordination in the programme accreditation processes of EQA bodies. Regarding the use of technology, the Philippine Accrediting Association of Schools, Colleges, and Universities (PAASCU) (2022) proposed blended accreditation of

programmes, arguing that it is flexible, less demanding and time-consuming, and more economical for all parties involved. In addition, in a study jointly commissioned by INQAAHE and Nepal's University Grants Commission on how the move from traditional to digital or virtual/blended accreditation during COVID-19 had affected EQA bodies as well as higher education institutions, notable novelties such as the introduction and use of online platforms, virtual interviews and meetings, the use of Google Docs to store and transfer piles of evidence documents to review panels, visual recordings of facilities or virtual tours of institutional infrastructure, and the elimination of reviewers having to travel long distances, were reported (Pandey & Subedi, 2023). Though, this study also revealed some challenges for higher education institutions having to adapt to the 'new normal' in terms of lack of or insufficient technological equipment and resources, and dearth or a quality ethos (ibid.).

Apart from these pertinent overlapping aspects among EQA bodies, the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training's report also captured additional fundamental points raised by higher education institutions, including some suggested ways in which these bodies could have an overall improved accreditation approach, i.e. effective communication, benchmarking, memoranda of understanding, institutional or national databases, and recognition of programmes accredited by other bodies (PhillipsKPA, 2017).

Suggested Ways for an Improved Accreditation Approach

Effective Communication. Good communication between EQA bodies themselves and between the latter and their various groups of stakeholders is said to be a key ingredient (Friedman et al., 2017; PhillipsKPA, 2017) to achieve the level of quality that higher education institutions, accrediting bodies, students, governments, and the wider public are striving to achieve (Choudhary & Rathore, 2013). For the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (2017), communication

in the accreditation process was equally important between higher education institutions and state agencies, as institutions are encouraged through the Commission's accreditation policy, to share accreditation materials with state agencies. Furthermore, institutions sketched the ideal situation, which allows for shared and supportive accreditation procedures, but they disappointingly stated that some EQA bodies are still "more single-minded in their approach" (PhillipsKPA, 2017, p. 79). The occurrence of inefficient communication between EQA bodies and higher education institutions concerning the effective application of accreditation policies and guidelines, and amendments in QA standards without prior consultation with institutions, was also reported (Friedman et al., 2017; McCurry, 2018).

PhillipsKPA (2017) further stated that it is imperative that review panels and the sub-committees of EQA bodies are well acquainted with QA criteria, practices, and procedures, hence expectations of their roles and functions should be communicated unambiguously during accreditation training sessions; however, preparations for accreditation exercises may be a daunting task for smaller EQA bodies. To rationalise EQA procedures in higher education institutions, build and promote effective lines of communication with other EQA bodies in Namibia, the NCHE strives to carry out its programme accreditation and institutional audit functions mindful of the accreditation functions and regulations of other EQA bodies (NCHE, 2009). The importance of enhancing existing communication and stakeholder networking channels among EQA bodies and higher education institutions was also emphasised (Friedman et al., 2017). Moreover, Atibuni (2020) accentuated ongoing discussions and meetings between EQA bodies and higher education institutions. In support of the latter, McCurry (2018) proposed the creation of a forum for EQA bodies – a platform which will allow them to regularly meet and discuss

experiences, challenges, and good practices in QA, but more particularly in programme accreditation.

Some additional proposals in terms of communication enhancement among EQA bodies and higher education institutions included the need to: (a) encourage and support collaborative opportunities among accrediting bodies, and elucidate their distinctive roles and functions; (b) publish good QA practices and improved ways of dealing with challenges to implement QA legislative practices; and (c) actively involve stakeholders in the development of QA policies and standards to increase public trust in the work of EQA bodies (McCurry, 2018; PhillipsKPA, 2017). According to Friedman et al. (2017), communication channels between accrediting agencies, professional bodies and higher education institutions can be improved through joint accreditation initiatives.

Benchmarking. The notion of benchmarking was adopted mainly by higher education institutions, and it became part of the QA discourse in higher education for the purpose of continuous enhancement of institutional management practices and procedures (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2017). According to the OECD, benchmarking refers to “the process of comparing higher education systems, including policies, practices and outcomes, to enable countries to identify strengths and weaknesses in their higher education systems; learn from each other; and improve the performance of their higher education systems” (2017, p. 58). Benchmarking forms an integral part of the IQA enhancement mechanisms of EQA bodies because of the different approaches each one applies and the unique challenges each one experiences (National Higher Education Benchmarking Institute, 2015). Denkler (2021) was of the view that EQA bodies ought to benchmark their accreditation processes, procedures, and guidelines to identify potential duplications, embrace good practices and incorporate the

necessary improvements. Consequently, accrediting bodies are encouraged to partake in national, regional, and international QA activities, such as webinars, seminars, workshops, and conferences, to establish contacts with counterparts and share, not only good practices, but also weaknesses in their systems (AUC & EUC, 2018). The NCHE and NQA also reported benchmarking as part of their key strategic activities to reach out to counterparts, nationally, regionally, and internationally (NCHE, 2018; NQA, 2016). PhillipsKPA (2017) reported that EQA bodies should take the lead in benchmarking initiatives to support higher education institutions to improve their operations in teaching, learning, and assessment.

Memoranda of Understanding (MOU). According to PhillipsKPA (2017), several MoUs are in existence between professional bodies and Australia's national QAA for higher education, namely the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, to support each other's work. Some of the areas of cooperation covered in these MoUs include effective communication channels and sharing of accreditation timelines; however, the partners anticipated possibilities to cooperate in future in some other areas, e.g., synchronising accreditation processes and schedules, and sharing review panel members and generic statistical data for risk assessment in higher education institutions (PhillipsKPA, 2017). Likewise, the NCHE reported that collaboration is important for Namibia's EQA bodies. In particular, the NCHE showed zeal to seal deals to cooperate with sister bodies to streamline the accreditation practices in higher education and curtail the weight on higher education institutions (NCHE, 2009). In its infancy stage of operation, the NCHE made concerted attempts to enter into an agreement with the NQA and, today, the two bodies have a signed MoU to cooperate in programme accreditation (NCHE, 2015). The signing of this agreement was inspired by section 6 (a) of the Higher Education Act, 2003, that prescribes that the NCHE and NQA must accredit higher education programmes in concurrence (Higher Education Act 2003).

In addition, the NCHE has an active MoU with the Institute of Chartered Accountants in Namibia (ICAN), and the parties developed and already rolled out implementation of an integrated accreditation manual for new and continued accreditation applications for programmes in the field of chartered accounting (NCHE, 2019b; NCHE & ICAN, 2017). Moreover, consultations pertaining to areas of cooperation with the ECN, HPCNA, and the Namibia Council for Architects and Quantity Surveyors (NCAQS) were mentioned (NCHE, 2015).

In addition, in his study, McCurry (2018) documented the experiences of EQA bodies regarding the accreditation or validation of programmes offered by higher education institutions. He reported that while some of these bodies are running their operations on a fully fledged basis, others are still in an embryonic stage, but all of them apply identical standard operating procedures for programme accreditation and experience the same challenges, e.g., availing resources (human and financial) for accreditation activities, and searching for and recruiting review panel members, among other. Entering into agreements could assist these bodies to overcome or reduce these challenges (PhillipsKPA, 2017).

Institutional or National Databases. One of the key elements in the provision of evidence documents in the accreditation of programmes is to collect “baseline data regarding the academic and operational aspects of the programme” (CHE, 2012, p. 8). It is the practice in some countries to create online accreditation databases to house key general and statistical information about higher education institutions and their programmes (U.S. Department of Education, Recognition and Accreditation, 2021). According to the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) (2016), a central database containing QA processes, outcomes, results, and reports of EQA exercises proved to be helpful to higher education institutions’ stakeholders as well as EQA bodies. Users of such a database would be allowed to establish which programmes of a particular institution was

subject to accreditation, when did it happen, which EQA body conducted the accreditation, and how the IQA of a particular programme(s) is achieved and maintained, among other (EQAR, 2016). PhillipsKPA (2017) further advised that to safeguard institutional data, databases should be password protected and users should register to access information. Developing and implementing such databases at a national level, where information pertaining to EQA activities and decisions can be fed into a repository, might increase mutual trust and recognition of programme accreditation decisions among EQA bodies, hence reducing overlapping accreditation functions (Cox & Malfroy, 2008; Friedman et al., 2017; Hou, 2012).

Furthermore, the report published by the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training suggested that higher education institutions can ease the load caused by the preparation of evidence documents for programme accreditation through: (a) relevant institutional data files created for other regulatory requirements that can be made easily available to all EQA bodies; (b) clearly labelled sets of information that can be used by different accrediting bodies to lessen repetition of efforts; (c) consistent presentation of generic information about the institution, such as the name, vision, mission, strategic objectives, physical and postal address; institutional management structure; student support services; staff development opportunities; internal QA policies, systems and procedures; financial planning and budgetary procedures, etc. that all EQA bodies could use; and (d) streamlining and aligning the requirements for programme-specific data and documents for accreditation in specific fields and sub-fields of study so that accrediting bodies can use related information, where applicable (PhillipsKPA, 2017).

Recognition of Programmes Accredited by other Bodies. Mutual recognition of programme accreditation outcomes refers to “the recognition by two or more external quality agencies and affirmation by each that it accepts the entire or partial decisions and judgments of the

other” (Woodhouse, 2008, as cited in Hou, 2012, p. 913). PhillipsKPA (2017) supported the notion of mutual recognition particularly for professional body accreditation to curb the challenges that higher education institutions and EQA bodies encounter in terms of overlapping functions. However, in a comparative study conducted by McCurry (2018) concerning the differences between the accreditation systems and processes applied by professional and QA regulatory bodies in Ireland, it was reported that the majority of the EQA bodies involved in the study, were against mutual recognition of accreditation decisions. PhillipsKPA maintains that “multiple accrediting bodies within a single industry or profession could work cooperatively to accredit providers, or at least to align their accreditation requirements and processes to deliver a more efficient process” (2017, p. 87). Moreover, if EQA bodies agree to recognise each other’s programme accreditation decisions, more economical methods and approaches can be introduced (e.g., standardised QA templates and courses of action) to reduce overlaps and the weight EQA might have on institutions (Frederiks & Heusser, 2005; McCurry, 2018; PhillipsKPA, 2017). Beccari and Rauret (2008) additionally contended that mutual recognition of accreditation outcomes adds credibility to the QA processes of EQA bodies, avoids the need for multiple accreditations, and leads to growing recognition of qualifications in higher education.

It was important to report about the impact of EQA on higher education institutions since it was the basis of this study. Hence, the latter is discussed in the next section.

How External Quality Assurance Affects Higher Education Institutions

As one of the pillars of higher education, teaching and learning are believed to be transformed and enhanced through EQA processes (Dicker, Garcia, Kelly & Mulrooney, 2018; Nyamwesa, Magambo & Onyango, 2020; Ryan 2015). However, the supposedly value-addition factor of EQA is frequently quizzed by stakeholders in higher education, and numerous studies

have found that the systems and processes of EQA bodies may not have the desired impact on teaching and learning or other functions of an institution, nor does it help institutions to effectively imbue change management (Ansah, 2016; Beerkens, 2018; Bishoff, 2018; Harvey, 2005; Leiber, Prades & Alvarez del Castillo, 2018; Liu et al., 2015; Lucander & Christersson, 2020; Machumu & Kisanga, 2014; Nyamwesa et al., 2020; PhillipsKPA, 2017; Ryan, 2015; Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018; Williams, 2016).

While it is a common phenomenon in many higher education systems for EQA to be assigned to more than one EQA body (European Commission, 2017), Friedman et al. (2017) argued that accreditation by multiple EQA bodies may put double strain on institutional resources in terms of money, time, and human power. Other scholars in the field echoed this sentiment (Beerkens, 2018; Nyamwesa et al., 2020). In the same vein, Atibuni (2020) signalled recurrent warnings about higher education institutions being intimidated by increasing workloads, labelled as “evaluation exhaustion” (Noda et al., 2018, p. 9), which include the development of self-assessment reports and the preparation of huge piles of evidence documentation. Torre and Zapata referred to the latter as “overload of information requirements” (2013, p. 12). In a study conducted by Materu and Righetti (2010) on the status and practices of QA in higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa, it was confirmed that the processes involved in the accreditation of programmes are indeed expensive and require a lot of human power. Imaniriho (2020) was also of the opinion that QA activities have huge resource implications for institutions.

Moreover, Torre and Zapata reported about “inconsistencies in the application of criteria, limited and poor use of indicators, lack of rigor in the accreditation decisions and conflicts of interest” (2013, pp. 11-12) in a study they conducted on the impact of EQA on higher education in Ibero-America. Such negative views may have an adverse effect on the intended improvement

of EQA in higher education institutions and easily defeat its purpose, according to PhillipsKPA (2017). The investigation conducted by Torre and Zapata (2013) further revealed that higher education institutions criticised EQA standards and processes, the induction of review panel members as well as the way in which and the time it takes for EQA bodies to approve accreditation outcomes, because each body applies a different approach to conduct their business. Friedman et al. (2017) reasoned that if EQA bodies start considering each other's approaches, common ground can be reached that could take the pressure off higher education institutions during external accreditation exercises.

Higher education institutions raised another grave concern about the accreditation decision in that if a programme is not granted full accreditation status, some EQA bodies tend to deny approval until such time that the first group of students graduated, and this practice adversely affects students and ultimately the performance of institutions (PhillipsKPA, 2017). The study conducted by Leiber et al. (2018) on the impact evaluation of programme accreditation at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (Spain) found that if a programme is not accredited, the institution is bound for a period of two years post accreditation not to incorporate any improvements whatsoever in the curriculum. Such scenarios could be even worse in the case of Namibia if more than one EQA body decides to take this direction in terms of the outcome of programme accreditation. What is more, the financial, administrative, and academic effects of accreditation, including the efforts to achieve and retain the approval and recognition of programmes, were also found to be strenuous on institutional resources (Friedman et al., 2017; Kelchen, 2017; Leiber et al., 2018; PhillipsKPA, 2017).

In addition, it was reported that although higher education institutions have established IQA departments/units/offices that provide support and guidance during programme accreditation

preparations, the bulk of the work is carried out by the academics in the main, and this practice inexorably interferes with their teaching and research time, and other academic responsibilities (Engineering Council, 2014; Friedman et al., 2017; Harvey, 2005; PhillipsKPA, 2017). According to PhillipsKPA (2017), higher education institutions also alluded to other impacting factors such as incongruities between verbal and written reports of review panel members, which leave them in the dark of what actions are actually required to improve or rectify the situation; ostensible opacity in the approach EQA bodies take to make decisions and lack of understanding or recognition of the challenges institutions encounter to address accreditation recommendations within the set timeframe; review panel members who seem to be more on the warpath (acting like watchdogs/policing) rather than to execute the tasks they were appointed for, or EQA bodies that “witch-hunt” (Atibuni, 2020, p. 39) higher education institutions; and EQA liaison officers who disregard institutions’ written requests for accreditation information.

The Commonwealth Department of Education and Training report revealed more effects of EQA on higher education institutions such as the inapt infringement of the right to the autonomy of institutions, impact on innovation, regulatory and financial burden, wide variation in the format and type of information required, and poorly prepared review panel members (PhillipsKPA, 2017).

Inapt Infringement of the Right to the Autonomy of Institutions

It was reported that some EQA bodies, especially those regulating specific professions, include quantitative assessment indicators in their quality standards such as student-to-faculty ratios; the number of hours faculty should spend on research; and work placement or work integrated learning hours (e.g., clinical practice, exposure and experience for students), which higher education institutions perceive as very prescriptive and costly to adhere to (PhillipsKPA, 2017). The EQA bodies could supposedly also not justify whether these prescriptive measures add

any value to the learning experience of students (Lucander & Christersson, 2020; PhillipsKPA, 2017). Considering the Namibian situation, if such prescriptive programme accreditation measures are enacted by the different EQA bodies, it may have a quadruple impact on higher education institutions. Furthermore, Torre and Zapata (2013) underscored the confines that EQA has on institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and advancement; and Atibuni (2020) reckoned that QA seems to be more accountability and compliance-driven than enhancement-driven, which could pose a possible risk to the autonomy of the institutions. In its study, PhillipsKPA (2017) also reported about cases where EQA bodies attempted to interfere with the way institutional budgets are allocated as well as with the organisational structure of universities.

On another note, to restructure accreditation guidelines and practices, the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) (2018) recommended that the sovereignty and academic freedom of higher education institutions ought to be respected. The USDE further suggested that accreditation processes should “protect institutional autonomy, honor individual campus missions, and afford schools the opportunity to build campus communities based on shared values” (2018, p. 7). In addition, recognition has been given to onerous EQA processes in the United Kingdom, and in an attempt to restructure EQA, it was proposed to give well-established higher education institutions more leeway to live out their autonomy, e.g., established institutions would not have to be subject to the compulsory five-year accreditation as they are allowed to develop and uphold their own academic quality standards, unless EQA is deemed necessary for some reason (Lewis, 2016). Espousing the thinking on greater institutional autonomy, Martin stated that “when HEIs have strong institutional capacities, autonomy can be more easily granted” (2018a, p. 3). Furthermore, some bodies regulating the engineering profession and higher education institutions offering engineering programmes devoted themselves to curtailing the burden of rigid accreditation

practices; for instance, engineering councils agreed to use institutional data for multiple purposes to ease the load on institutions to provide the same data at different intervals (Engineering Council, 2014). From an African perspective, it was reported that South Africa has made great strides in harmonising the QA standards of the CHE with that of professional bodies (Materu & Righetti, 2010).

Influence on Innovation

There are dual views on the effects of programme accreditation on institutional innovation. It was reported that higher education institutions felt, depending on the particular field or profession, that some EQA bodies are still old-fashioned in their programme accreditation approaches, with QA criteria and processes that are too rigid in terms of the development and offering of programmes, and even the choice of topics that should be covered in the curriculum, which does not give academics much room to apply their creative minds (e.g., to think out of the box and explore with simulation-based training) and implement good practices, or respond to changing industry needs (Friedman et al., 2017; Harvey, 2005; Istileulova, 2018; Martin, 2018a; PhillipsKPA, 2017; USDE, 2018). Institutions seemed not to be content with the boundaries set by some accrediting bodies and described it as “policing compliance with current standards” (PhillipsKPA, 2017, p. 73). Such prescriptions curb innovators to live out their creative minds and introduce novel subject content and/or pedagogical methods (Atibuni, 2020; Friedman et al., 2017; Kelchen, 2017; PhillipsKPA, 2017).

On the other hand, and besides the negative impact of accreditation, PhillipsKPA (2017) also reported some encouraging views, i.e. EQA bodies and higher education institutions stated that accreditation can act as a catalyst for innovation if it is conducted efficiently. For example, the following positive effects were noted: programme accreditation exercises almost forced

academics to invent improved ways of teaching, learning and assessment by incorporating practical application in subject content and knowledge that enriched the teaching and learning experience for academics and students alike; and academics stated that accreditation left them with no other option but to volte-face what they teach, how they teach and how they evaluate student performance (Liu et al., 2015; PhillipsKPA, 2017).

Regulatory and Financial Burden

The cost of programme accreditation is found to be escalating with every EQA body that has its own fee structure, and what makes it worse, according to higher education institutions, is the “multiple layers of regulation and multiple jurisdictions” (PhillipsKPA, 2017, p. 59) with whose requirements they must abide. What is more, some other costs mentioned include indirect and opportunity costs (PhillipsKPA, 2017). Leiber et al. (2018) reported that higher education institutions believed resources should be channelled to the development and enhancement of infrastructural needs (lecture rooms, laboratories, etc.) and teaching and learning support services rather than paying extraordinary amounts of money for accreditation exercises. PhillipsKPA (2017) noted further that higher education institutions, at times, do not have a choice but to appoint staff on a temporary basis (casuals), as per the need, to assist with prior site visit arrangements and document submissions for the accreditation of some programmes – the latter mostly involved professional programmes. For instance, specific reference was made to the accreditation of programmes in the fields of Nutrition and Dietetics, and Occupational Therapy, which “each required 300 – 400 hours of senior academic staff time, time to support 3-day site visits, and \$15,000 – \$20,000 in site visit costs” (PhillipsKPA, 2017, p. 70).

Nyamwesa et al. (2020) reported that institutions sometimes must distribute programme accreditation responsibilities to other staff members which results in the costs to even further

increase, as these staff members must be remunerated for their time and effort. Istileulova (2018) reverberated the concern about the exorbitant costs of accreditation and the many hours institutions must sacrifice to obtain a satisfactory accreditation outcome. In addition, the study conducted by Friedman et al. (2017) also revealed that:

Institutions are required to take periodic academic revalidation of their programmes; this is a significant resource demand, and it needs to be undertaken in addition to their regular professional accreditation processes ... and ... many HEI personnel have anecdotally noted the dual demands of accreditation and evaluation of QA as a duplication of resource demands. (p. 8)

This is exactly what is happening currently in the administration of EQA processes in Namibian higher education institutions; and hence the need for this study to explore appropriate ways in which the possible negative effects or burden can be lifted off institutions. However, of recent times, the professional body dealing with architectural and quantity surveying programmes in Namibia, the NCAQS, approached the NCHE to conduct joint accreditation of said programmes (Quality Assurance Unit, NUST, 2021). The joint accreditation exercise did not only involve national EQA bodies (i.e. NCHE and the NCAQS) but a regional and international body as well (i.e. South African Council for the Architectural Profession and the Commonwealth Association of Architects) (ibid.).

Wide Variation in the Format and Type of Information Required

Besides the bulky documentation that institutions are required to submit with every programme accreditation exercise, the layout and types of documents, and the way in which the documents must be presented to EQA bodies also differ (PhillipsKPA, 2017). The dissimilarity in format and type of information required takes up a lot of time of the academics, because with each

accreditation they must recompile and realign the same information to adhere to the requirements of different EQA bodies (Friedman et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2015; Nyamwesa et al., 2020; PhillipsKPA, 2017). In correspondence with the findings of PhillipsKPA (2017), Torre and Zapata (2013) reported that institutions are sometimes required to submit data in formats that do not match institutional data management systems. This scenario, according to Torre and Zapata (2013), further complicates efforts to reach consensus between EQA bodies and higher education institutions concerning the definitions and interpretations of especially numerical data. Furthermore, undue demands for confidential information were noted, e.g., confidential information on student records, information on the financial activities and performance of organisations with whom higher education institutions have formal partnerships; recent balance sheets of institutions; and revenue and disbursement statements projected for a certain financial reporting period, for instance, three consecutive years (PhillipsKPA, 2017).

Poorly Prepared Review Panel Members

In the study conducted by Torre and Zapata (2013), it was noted that higher education institutions complained about the autonomy and efficiency of review panel members. PhillipsKPA (2017) pointed out that review panel members are occasionally found to be not well versed with quality indicators used in the accreditation exercise as well as those used by higher education institutions for their own internal quality enhancement, nor are they acquainted with advances in QA in higher education or national, regional, and international good practices in QA in higher education. It was also reported that review panel members from foreign QA systems often tend to inflict ideas and practices used in their home countries on local higher education institutions (PhillipsKPA, 2017) that, in the words of Martin, “could become an obstacle to context specificity”

(2018a, p. 3). In addition, some panel members show lack of understanding for institutional roles and structures and have a propensity to act outside their scope of duty (PhillipsKPA, 2017).

Moreover, occurrences in Africa were reported where review panel members showed an unpreparedness for the task, lack of objectivity and due regard for the accreditation exercise, and lack of expertise in the field (Atibuni, 2020). It is for these reasons that review panels must be trained appropriately to avoid nonconformity with evaluation procedures, thus the ability of review panel members to show understanding of complex situations unique to individual institutions and/or departments was found to be significant (King, 2012; National Centre for Professional Education Quality Assurance Foundation, 2021).

Given the positive impact of programme accreditation, it was reported that some countries found ways to deal with multifarious accreditation and even abolished this practice to take the accreditation load off higher education institutions (Noda et al., 2018). One such example is the “exemption policy” (Noda et al., 2018, p. 8) introduced by the Taiwanese Ministry of Education that stipulates that if a study programme is accredited by recognised local and international EQA bodies, it does not have to be re-subjected for accreditation or re-accreditation to the Taiwanese Higher Education Evaluation and Accreditation Council. This initiative could most probably be considered in the case of Namibia to address the quandary that higher education institutions and EQA bodies are currently facing in terms of the accreditation of study programmes.

Additionally, some encouraging feedback that emanated from EQA activities in higher education institutions include enhanced higher education management information systems and improved QA control mechanisms and directives (Liu et al., 2015; Martin, 2018; Prado, 2018; Torre & Zapata, 2013; Williams, 2016). Similarly, Martin (2018b) claimed that national EQA systems considerably influence the progress and improvement of IQA systems in higher education

institutions, which in turn can contribute to the amelioration of teaching and learning. In line with this assertion, the study conducted by PhillipsKPA (2017) revealed that higher education institutions were content with the positive effect programme accreditation had on their pedagogical skills. The institutions reported that “one consequence of accreditation has been greater integration of theory and practice, and better scaffolding of learning through the course [and] new assessments are more carefully designed to prioritise knowledge synthesis” (PhillipsKPA, 2017, p. 59). Prado’s (2016) study conducted on the impact of accreditation on the quality of academic programmes of Central Mindanao University also backed this claim of PhillipsKPA.

Moreover, Shah (as cited by Liu et al., 2015) found that EQA contributes to the enhancement of processes used to develop institutional strategic plans; and to heighten quality, some higher education institutions adopted an ethos of making decisions based on evidence, i.e. evidence-based approach for strengthening IQA. In addition, Ibrahim (2014) claimed that stakeholders tend to have more confidence and trust in institutions whose programmes are accredited and internationally recognised. Bearing in mind the topic under investigation, it was deemed necessary to discuss the impact of EQA on IQA and vice versa.

Internal Quality Assurance versus External Quality Assurance

QA in higher education can happen at the level of higher education institutions, which is commonly termed IQA, and it can also happen at national, regional, and international level, generally known as EQA (Matei & Iwinska, 2016). At the outset, QA was an activity that emerged outside the reigns of higher education institutions, driven by governments that established EQA bodies at a time when the quality of higher education was put under the lens because of the mushrooming of private providers and increased demands for accountability (Garwe & Gwati, 2018; Martin, 2018b; Njui, 2018; Waheed, 2018). This has caused higher education institutions to

continuously engage in IQA activities to take ownership of their own quality, to not only guarantee the quality of the education and services that they offer (Elken & Stensaker 2018; ENQA, 2015; Matei & Iwinska, 2016; Machumu & Kisanga, 2014; NUST, 2020a), but also to ensure that their offerings satisfy EQA monitoring and evaluation requirements performed by national, regional, and international accreditation bodies.

Internal Quality Assurance

IQA refers to the actions and efforts by and within higher education institutions to constantly monitor, evaluate, and enhance the provision of their academic offerings through the implementation of quality management policies, practices, procedures, and guidelines (Dill, 2010; Matei & Iwinska, 2016). According to Atibuni (2020), the IIEP (2020b), and Machumu and Kisanga (2014), IQA is the internal QA mechanisms employed by an institution to demonstrate that it is satisfying its own commitments, while complying with national quality standards in higher education. In countries where institutional autonomy enjoys high regard, higher education institutions can design and implement IQA instruments and practices themselves, but in cases where institutions still grow in IQA, they often use the national QA standards until such time that they can develop their own institutional instruments in alignment with the national EQA body's standards (Martin, 2018b; Matei & Iwinska, 2016). IQA is also described as structured and uniformed procedures that higher education institutions have in place to “securing fit-for-purpose and quality outputs of processes” (AUC & EUC, 2018, p. 37). In the main, these IQA procedures may include conducting quality reviews at programme and departmental or unit level, doing critical self-evaluations and self-reflections, developing quality improvement plans, moderating and validating student assessments, conducting student evaluations, administering service quality surveys, engaging in continuous reflective practices, and building and maintaining academic

integrity and a quality culture, among other (Machumu & Kisanga, 2014; Matei & Iwinska, 2016; NUST, 2020b; Ogbeche, 2021; University of Namibia [UNAM], 2015).

Moreover, higher education providers engage in IQA activities mostly for the sake of continuously enhancing the quality of teaching, learning, and assessment as well as inculcating an overall culture of quality within the institution, hence IQA is regarded to be mainly improvement-driven (Elken & Stensaker, 2018; European Students' Union, 2015; Friedman et al., 2017; Martin, 2018b; Matei & Iwinska, 2016; National Commission for Further and Higher Education, 2013; Nicholson, 2011; Nyamwesa et al., 2020; Paintsil, 2016; Tamrat, 2019). Ogbeche concurred with the improvement-oriented characteristic of IQA and that it is mainly aimed at enhancing the learning experience of students, but also emphasised that IQA “might have [a] management ... or employment focus” (2021, p. 44). The improvement focus of IQA should drive the efficient and effective management of institutional QA to ensure an output of skilful and competent graduates who meet the expectations of employers (Berse, 2018; Dicker et al., 2018).

In addition, considering the fact that the focus of IQA is essentially on improving the quality of teaching and learning in higher education, Henard (as cited in Matei & Iwinska, 2016) proposed three approaches that can aid higher education institutions to improve the quality of teaching and learning, i.e.: (a) designing and implementing institutional QA policies and systems, including mechanisms that can foster a total quality culture; (b) monitoring and evaluating academic programmes that include modalities to gauge the design, content, and offering of programmes; and (c) providing opportunities, mechanisms, and support structures for academics and students, e.g., continuous professional development programmes for academics, training opportunities to enhance lecturing skills, student support services, etc., to efficiently and effectively coordinate teaching and learning activities. It was also noted that IQA could assist

higher education institutions to achieve total quality management and improvement involving staff at all levels of the institution, initiate more sustainable cost-cutting operating procedures, and identify and facilitate training ventures for all staff that may help build institutional confidence in IQA systems (National Commission for Further and Higher Education, 2013; Njui, 2018).

External Quality Assurance

EQA refers to the QA policies and practices in place at national, regional, and international levels used to assure the quality of education and training offered by higher education institutions (Dill, 2010). According to the AUC and EUC (2018), EQA entails the periodic monitoring and assessment of the processes of higher education institutions, including the policies that support them, to ensure that national quality standards are met. EQA is typically conducted through the engagement of an exterior regulatory body (e.g., in the case of Namibia, the NCHE and NQA as well as professional bodies like the HPCNA and ECN), which evaluates the quality of the systems and processes of higher education institutions or the quality of institutions' programmes to establish whether institutions fulfil set national, regional, or international quality standards (IIEP, 2020b; Stensaker, 2020). Given the fact that EQA is conducted by structures outside the higher education institution whose quality standards institutions need to adhere to, it is generally perceived that EQA is accountability-driven (Elken & Stensaker, 2018; European Students' Union, 2015; Friedman et al., 2017; Martin, 2018b; Matei & Iwinska, 2016; National Commission for Further and Higher Education, 2013; Nicholson, 2011; Nyamwesa et al., 2020; Paintsil, 2016; Tamrat, 2019). In addition to the accountability focus of EQA, Matei and Iwinska (2016) claimed that it also serves the purpose of regulating and ultimately improving a country's higher education system.

On the other hand, prominent scholars in the area of higher education quality, such as Harvey (as cited in Matei & Iwinska, 2016) and Martin (2016), signalled warning signs about the likelihood of EQA to result in a mere compliance check because academics might make concerted efforts to simply satisfy EQA bodies and not necessarily to improve quality just so to decrease disturbances in the academic affairs of the institution. It was further reported that EQA, if effectively implemented, will aid in bringing about greater trust among higher education stakeholders, including EQA bodies, and this may lead to better coordination of the QA regimes of a country's higher education system (Berse, 2018; Matei & Iwinska, 2016). If the latter (greater trust) could be achieved in the Namibian situation, it possibly will lead to harmonisation of the country's EQA processes.

According to Martin and Stella (as cited in Martin, 2018a), Njui (2018), and Lewis (2016), accreditation – programmatic and institutional – is the most widely favoured EQA system the world over, where the ability of an academic programme or institution itself to conform to generic QA standards, is determined. While some countries opt for programme accreditation, others opt for quality audits at institutional level that assess the strengths of the IQA system employed by the higher education institution that is being audited (Martin & Stella, 2007, as cited in Martin, 2018a). In the case of Namibia, some EQA systems include both programme accreditation and institutional audits/accreditation (NCHE and NQA), whereas professional body accreditation only focuses on programmes (HPCNA and ECN).

Yet another component of EQA is that it is compulsory or obligatory in some countries, while it is voluntary in others, hence higher education institutions are required to submit a formal application to the EQA body (Martin, 2018a; Matei & Iwinska, 2016). As far as Namibia is concerned, EQA is mandatory as per the laws of the four bodies investigated (NCHE, NQA,

HPCNA, and ECN). It was also noted that a voluntary instrument instead of a mandatory tool would be a better choice in improvement-oriented systems (IIEP, 2006, as cited in Matei & Iwinska, 2016; Martin, 2016). It was further argued that “only when HEIs are motivated and committed to change can the EQA system operate as a development tool for higher education” (IIEP, 2006, as cited in Matei & Iwinska, 2016, p. 50). However, the use of voluntary systems is not advisable in situations where higher education institutions seem to be functioning under false pretence, as they would most likely not apply for accreditation, according to Martin (2016).

Influence of Internal Quality Assurance on External Quality Assurance

Friedman et al. (2017), supported by Martin (2018b), argued that in some rare cases national EQA bodies could originate from the practice of local higher education institutions that proactively seek international accreditation for their programmes in countries where domestic EQA systems are non-existent; and that IQA could bring about harmonisation between or give direction to EQA processes. Similarly, in a study conducted by Ciolfi, Kastelliz, Caris and Mendes (2018) on whether the organisation of IQA is affected by how EQA is organised and the other way around, it was reported that changes and improvements of EQA systems and practices can be driven by the way in which IQA is structured. For example, in a project commissioned by the NCHE on the design and development of minimum quality standards for higher education in Namibia, the consultancy team drew on already existing quality standards and practices used in the country’s public higher education institutions (UNAM and NUST) as benchmarks to formulate the minimum standards (NCHE, 2021).

In addition, review panels appointed for programme or institutional accreditation, seem to believe that it is the way IQA is coordinated by higher education institutions that yield the expected results and contribute to the successes of EQA (Matei & Iwinska, 2016). In fact, this view is

supported by Saeed and Fadlallah (2015) who claimed that the success of EQA is driven by active IQA units that provide continuous support to academic departments during accreditation, and the institution during audits, by coordinating the self-evaluation process and the entire EQA exercise.

Moreover, the National Commission for Further and Higher Education (2013), in Malta, believed that good IQA practices could play a key role in building a nation-wide quality ethos in higher education. Contributing to this view, Matei and Iwinska (2016) postulated that IQA should be regarded as the core of national QA systems and procedures, because institutions relentlessly engage in IQA activities for the purpose of continuous quality enhancement and nurturing of an institution-wide quality culture that forms the backbone of a country-wide higher education quality culture. On the contrary, in a recent study conducted by Afolabi and Idowu (2019) on the challenges universities in Africa encounter in terms of quality management and the higher education agenda, they reported that lack of academic autonomy, poor leadership and management skills, and misuse of institutional funds may pose serious threats to the efforts of EQA intended to improve institutional quality. The authors argued that QA and management in African higher education institutions is hugely at risk because of challenges experienced with bureaucratic leaders (ibid.).

Influence of External Quality Assurance on Internal Quality Assurance

It is commonly believed that the growth of IQA emanated from the introduction of national EQA bodies and their respective statutes (Ansah, 2016; Kettunen, 2012; Martin, 2018b). As noted earlier, the latter is backed by Njui who stated that “while quality assurance was initially externally driven, individual HEIs have today set up IQA mechanisms to help them monitor and manage the quality of education as they also align their IQA with external policies and frameworks governing education” (2018, p. 351). Hence, one can say that EQA serves as an initiator for the establishment

of formal IQA structures in higher education institutions as well as a value-addition mechanism that further leavens the IQA systems introduced by higher education providers (Albaqami, 2019; Ansah, 2016; Atibuni, 2020; Harvey, 2018; Martin, 2018b; Paintsil, 2016; Tamrat, 2019). In the same vein, Nyamwesa et al. noted that “HEIs are not taking trouble to equip their Quality Assurance Officers with the required skills. This increases the importance of EQA to oversee the operations of HEIs” (2020, p. 193). It was also reported that QA officers in higher education institutions in Africa often must carry out their functions in uncondusive working spaces and that they are often drowned in full work schedules (Atibuni, 2020; Swanzy, Langa & Ansah, 2018).

In addition, an example from Africa was reported where the EQA bodies of three countries in East Africa (Tanzania, Uganda, and Kenya) pulled their resources together to ensure their higher education institutions put in place the required mechanisms for the enhancement of the quality of their education (Afolabi & Idowu, 2019). Ogbeche (2021), backed by Njuo (2018), argued that IQA mechanisms and practices have seen the dawn of time in numerous higher education institutions around the globe to not only comply with national QA requirements, but also to make use of these opportunities to collect and produce different types of information (evidence) sources used by university communities to meet the requirements of their own internal quality management and monitoring systems. This argument is also supported by Lucander and Christersson (2020) in a study they have conducted on the design, development, and evaluation of a new process to quality assure assessments for full academic programmes, where they found that documentation collected and presented in an EQA exercise could be used for institutional transformation and improvement on a short- and long-term basis.

In favour of the positive impact of EQA on institutional quality, Bishoff (2018) and Martin (2016) argued that the biggest contributing factor of improvement in institutional quality is the

self-evaluation processes that institutions need to engage in to reflect and report on the standard of their academic offerings, not only during formal external accreditation exercises, but also during their own internal review processes.

Furthermore, in an IIEP Policy Brief, it was reported that institutional audits and the accreditation of programmes conducted by the Council on Higher Education's Quality Committee (HEQC) in South African universities, motivated many institutions to duly put QA structures in place, and design IQA policies and systems consonant with the QA standards and requirements of the HEQC (Martin, 2018a). Equally, IQA structures, policies, systems, and processes in Namibian higher education institutions came to fruition through the establishment of the NCHE that, as prescribed in the Higher Education Act, has the mandate to "promote quality assurance in higher education [and] monitor the quality assurance mechanisms of higher education institutions" (2003, p. 5). Subsequently, in an effort to act in line with the monitoring powers assigned to the NCHE, institutions, in particular public higher education institutions, established IQA structures soon after the NCHE came into being. For example, in 2007, NUST created the Unit for Quality Assurance to coordinate the development and institutionalisation of the institution's quality management system (NUST, 2020b), while UNAM's Centre for Quality Assurance and Management was set up in 2010, with the responsibility of developing, implementing, and managing the university's Quality Assurance and Enhancement Policy and Procedures (UNAM, n.d.). Albaqami (2019) also reported that the body responsible for national accreditation in Saudi Arabia provides guidance to higher education institutions on QA related matters and supports them to put up their own IQA structures. Furthermore, as reported by Nyamwesa et al. (2020), EQA bodies are sometimes not left without the responsibility to watch over the QA procedures of higher education institutions

because some providers simply do not see the importance of capacitating institutional QA staff with the necessary skills to perform their tasks efficiently.

Elken and Stensaker (2018) also emphasised that EQA undoubtedly has a substantial impact on the emergence and enhancement of IQA management mechanisms, and that the onus is on higher education providers to duly satisfy the expectations of EQA bodies. In this regard, reference can be made to the approach followed by the German Accreditation Council that exempts higher education providers from being subjected to EQA once they are granted accreditation status; institutions can then redesign and improve already in use IQA tools or develop novel ones and incorporate existing IQA systems to fit their own internal context (Lewis, 2016; Martin, 2018b).

On the contrary, some studies have reported that EQA does not seem to have a bearing on strengthening the quality enhancement mechanisms of higher education institutions, but that IQA tactics employed by institutions could have a greater effect on the real quality of teaching and student learning experiences (Lucander & Christersson, 2020; Matei & Iwinska, 2016). Though, according to Matei and Iwinska (2020), the latter phenomenon is mostly found in advanced higher education systems with well-developed IQA structures. An example was given of some countries in the European Higher Education Area that attested to the claim that IQA reaps greater benefits in terms of quality enhancement within higher education institutions, i.e., “in some countries proper and well-designed EQA structures and procedures had been set up and implemented but it later turned out that these formal EQA mechanisms were not sufficient for stimulating significant quality improvement and transformation at the level of higher education institutions and teaching and learning” (Matei & Iwinska, 2016, p. 27).

Considering the preceding discussions on the impact of IQA on EQA and vice versa, the next section presents a discussion on the relationship between the two concepts and how it influences higher education institutions with regards to programme accreditation.

Relationship between Internal Quality Assurance and External Quality Assurance

In a study conducted by Friedman et al. (2017) on the accreditation by EQA bodies in higher education institutions in Ireland, it was reported that a third of the participants felt that EQA and IQA are individual processes and that there is barely or no correlation between the two, but this was said to be most likely the case in systems where well-established institutions are allowed to conduct self-accreditation through the application of self-developed IQA systems and processes, according to Martin (2018b). Nonetheless, hope was expressed for a positive relationship to develop between EQA and IQA in the future (Friedman et al., 2017; Paintsil, 2016). On the contrary, Shawyun posited that IQA and EQA cannot be separated, and described the two terms as a “twinned concept” (2009, p. 24), where IQA represents audits, assessments, and assurance that ultimately culminates in accreditation, which on its turn represents EQA. Furthermore, Paintsil (2016) believed a positive link might be achieved if there is suppleness not only in the approach used to organise IQA, but also in EQA systems to ensure pliability, harmonisation, and amalgamation in the functions carried out by national EQA bodies. This kind of integrated approach might work in the Namibian situation, as it might help to eliminate the overlapping functions between the NCHE, NQA, HPCNA and ECN, and the possible negative effects on higher education institutions.

Another view in favour of a positive link between EQA and IQA is that the management of higher education institutions should take the lead to bring about better alignment and coordination between EQA and IQA processes so that institutions can experience the desired

makeover that is expected from EQA and become part of a community of reflective practitioners that uses EQA as a yardstick to ensure continuous improvement (Agoro, 2013; Albaqami, 2019; Lucander & Christersson, 2020; NUST, 2020b; Stonehouse, 2015). Nyamwesa et al. (2020) reasoned that accreditation bodies and higher education institutions must pull their efforts to build credible higher education systems, as by themselves none of the two entities would be able to accomplish this goal. Other scholars argued that EQA and IQA are developing in tandem, i.e. when novel EQA systems and processes are put in place, it is important to consult higher education institutions to accommodate different institutional contexts because providers would want to conform with EQA standards for the sake of quality improvement (Ciolfi et al., 2018; Shawyun & Al-Karni, 2014).

As noted earlier, the purpose of QA is to guarantee accountability or to ensure improvement/enhancement/advancement (Nicholson, 2011). It is argued that “quality occupies the middle ground between the external and the internal; a philosophy or system that focuses and guides the interaction between the external calls for increased accountability and the internal efforts of an organization that is addressing it” (Koslowki, 2006, as quoted in Nicholson, 2011, p. 6). In relation to Shawyun’s (2009) claim that IQA and EQA are inseparable, it is believed that “at the heart of all quality assurance activities are the twin purposes of accountability and enhancement” (ENQA, 2015, as quoted in Matei & Iwinska, 2016, p. 29). In the ESG it is noted that in order to reap the benefits of national QA systems, it is important to inform higher education institutions as well as the public at large about the quality of providers’ activities, which speaks to the accountability aspect, and also to give advice and recommendations to providers on how they can further improve their activities, which addresses the enhancement aspect of QA (ENQA,

2015). “Quality assurance and quality enhancement are thus inter-related.” (ENQA, 2015, as quoted in Matei & Iwinska, 2016, pp. 29-30)

However, it was noted that, in the main, EQA had been given prominence over IQA, where a conformance and accountability philosophy enjoyed more attention than a culture of continuous improvement, creating a skewed balance between the two strands that could possibly intimidate the self-rule of higher education institutions (Atibuni, 2020; Salmi, 2016). In addition, Matei and Iwinska (2016) claimed that despite the likely accountability and improvement balance in the roles and functions of a national QA system, it remains a daunting task to obtain enhancement through EQA activities. With reference to the latter, Rosa, Santos, Cardoso and Amaral (as cited in Gregory & De Lourdes Machado-Taylor, 2015) reported that respondents embraced the quality enhancement aspect (IQA) more than the accountability aspect (EQA) and felt that institutions must go through too much trouble to satisfy the accountability demands of EQA, in a study they carried out on challenges for QA beyond 2010.

As part of the conceptual framework of this study, the PDCA Cycle (see Figure 3) can be linked with the two strands in QA in higher education, i.e., IQA and EQA. The improvement focus of IQA is consonant with the second phase in the PDCA Cycle of doing that requires higher education institutions to transform their internal operations to achieve quality enhancement, while the accountability principle of EQA is consistent with the fourth phase in the PDCA Cycle of acting that allows higher education institutions the opportunity to affect some changes by introducing enriched QA processes in response to greater public answerability, if so required (Asif & Raouf, 2013). It was further reported that the accountability focus of EQA is not only applicable to higher education institutions, but EQA bodies too should ensure that they are answerable to their stakeholders, for instance, through applying for membership to QA networks in the region or

elsewhere (Martin, 2016). Another way in which EQA bodies can guarantee accountability is through periodic external reviews as indicated in the INQAAHE Guidelines of Good Practice (Martin, 2016), ESG (ENQA, 2015), or as suggested in the ASG-QA (AUC & EUC, 2018).

Worth mentioning also, are the advantages of an effective relationship between IQA and EQA at national, regional, and international levels, reported by Atibuni (2020), i.e.: (a) it might be easier for higher education institutions and their programmes to conform to QA standards benchmarked at national, regional, and international levels if there is proper interconnection between IQA and EQA systems and procedures; (b) it will ensure that higher education providers are constantly provided with opportunities to continuously upgrade and enhance the quality of their programmes as well as the quality of the institutions themselves; and (c) it will impart punctilious processes for the approval of programmes and courses, stimulate and strengthen discussions about effective teaching and learning, and improve the level of student awareness and perceptions about teaching and related aspects (Harvey, 2018, as cited in Atibuni, 2020).

In addition to these, are the benefits noted by Hayward (as cited in Atibuni, 2020), i.e., the interrelatedness between IQA and EQA will make credit recognition and transfer easier between public and private higher education institutions if review panel members are recruited from both public and private institutions, this will also lead to greater coordination between public and private higher education providers; and review panel members are provided with the opportunity to tap into the ideas, knowledge, and experience of peer institutions during site visits that they can adopt or adapt for quality enhancement purposes at their own institutions.

The next section elaborates on the challenges of EQA for higher education institutions and EQA bodies as well as the benefits of EQA for higher education institutions, students, and the profession, including the public.

Challenges and Benefits of External Quality Assurance

Weir opined that while many higher education institutions, the world over, have embraced EQA as a second nature improvement-oriented exercise and can be counted as “an output” (2009, p. 60) of higher education providers, the good practices expected to come out of this exercise, yet remain indistinct. The author questioned whether higher education institutions implement QA procedures consistently and if the environment in which EQA procedures are applied is duly considered (ibid.). Huang (2017) regarded it important that the scope of EQA is carefully determined, as not all national QA systems might be fit for application to the different types of higher education institutions that operate in a country. For instance, the Japan University Accreditation Association, and the Japan Institution for Higher Education Evaluation are mandated to accredit only universities and junior colleges, with the exclusion of colleges of technology (ibid.). These are but some of the challenges of EQA; however, several studies reported on the challenges as well as the benefits of EQA (Friedman et al., 2017; Huang, 2017; Lewis, 2016; Martin, 2018b; Nyamwesa et al., 2020; Orkodashvili, 2013; PhillipsKPA, 2017; Ryan, 2015; Simukungwe, 2018; Weir, 2009). Next, the challenges of EQA as they pertain to higher education institutions and EQA bodies as well as the benefits of EQA for higher education institutions, students, professions, and the public at large, are discussed.

Challenges Specific to Higher Education Institutions

Martin (2018) has raised a few pertinent concerns about the challenges that higher education institutions are facing as regards EQA, i.e. it can decrease the ownership of quality practices in institutions that might place a damper on the creativity of staff to enhance IQA; accreditation panels sometimes demand the design and implementation of IQA mechanisms that are fit for their own countries’ higher education systems that have no direct bearing on the context

of local institutions, making it cumbersome for higher education institutions to accommodate the necessary changes in their IQA processes; and EQA might prevent higher education institutions to roll out new programmes in time or as planned, because the accreditation turnaround time is sometimes too long; and added to this, is the long period it takes institutions – approximately one-year to one-year-and-six months – just to complete the self-evaluation report as per the requirements of EQA bodies (Simukungwe, 2018). PhillipsKPA (2017) noted that the period for the accreditation of professional programmes can sometimes differ from six months to five years.

Furthermore, there seems to be no parallel networking and collaboration between EQA bodies to streamline EQA systems, practices, and processes, or to develop an efficient and independent peer-reviewed accreditation system, making conformance to EQA requirements even more daunting for higher education institutions (Orkodashvili, 2013). Lack of cooperation among EQA bodies might put unnecessary strain on higher education institutions to fulfil the requirements of each individual body (Garwe, 2019), like in the case of Namibia. In addition, Beerkens (2015) argued that the drive of EQA bodies to focus on the accomplishment of their own strategic objectives and associated key performance indicators cause them to oppose attempts to coordinate their processes. Orkodashvili (2013) also reasoned that the absence of a unified accreditation system may encourage a breeding place for exploitation and pressure on higher education institutions to comply with national and international QA requirements. Additionally, the replication of programme accreditation executed by different EQA bodies that results in excessive regulation, was emphasised by several researchers (Butcher, 2017; Friedman et al., 2017; Hernández-Fernández et al., 2021), and some of the main contributing factors, according to PhillipsKPA (2017), is the development of multidisciplinary courses and the tendency of higher

education institutions to pursue accreditation for their programmes at international level to keep up with the demands of globalisation (Huang, 2017; Lam, 2010).

Moreover, EQA systems and processes are many at times perceived as being a burden, too dogmatic and stringent (Friedman et al., 2017; Martin, 2018b; Nyamwesa et al., 2020), and as such, draining individual and institutional capacity. Simukungwe believed that “the approaches to assuring quality demand human capacity, as the success of each approach depends on the quality, dedication and integrity of administrators and academic staff who prepare self-assessments and those who serve as peer reviewers at institutions being reviewed” (2018, p. 62). In addition, some studies noted that the limited time allocated to accreditation site visits (three days in most cases) and the pressure on institutions to get everything ready and act promptly on requests from review panels, contribute to emotional (resistance and likely conflict) and mental health problems (angst or nervousness) among staff involved in accreditation (Alshamsi, Thomson & Santos, 2020; Atibuni, 2020; Matei & Iwinska, 2016; PhillipsKPA, 2017; Weir, 2009). Alshamsi et al. (2020) stated that the pressure for time during accreditation affects staff relations negatively. Staff are becoming agitated with each other, or “snapping at each other” (Alshamsi et al., 2020, p. 7) if their colleagues do not act swiftly to review panels’ requests. States of panicking among academics while awaiting outcomes or decisions on the accreditation status of programmes, were reported (Simukungwe, 2018).

In an investigation carried out by Mahmoodian, Safaei, Meraji, Kimiafar, Farsinegar and Ghasemi (2016) on the perceptions of staff in the health information management field about the challenges and strengths of implementing accreditation procedures, it was noted that EQA processes contribute to situations where staff are demotivated to give their full cooperation due to growing workloads. Since the accreditation exercise can be quite demanding, it may cause possible

contention among institutional staff (Matei & Iwinska, 2016). For example, Weir (2009) reported about tension between academics and managers of institutional QA units or departments, where academics felt that QA managers have sometimes too much authority to interfere with and regulate their work, which decreases their academic autonomy. Yet another challenge noted is academics who oppose EQA and perceive it as something that is unnecessarily enforced on them, or “something done to them rather than an integral part of what they do” (Matei & Iwinska, 2016, p. 42). Hence, the authors reasoned that for EQA to have a progressive effect on higher education institutions, the staff, but especially academics, should be rather devoted and inspired, and embrace it as a mechanism for total quality enhancement (*ibid.*).

According to Simukungwe (2018), the QA units in higher education institutions are many at times thinly staffed and lack the required qualifications and experience to handle programme accreditation processes effectively and efficiently. Furthermore, Huang (2017) argued that it remains a challenge in some countries, e.g., in East Asia, to develop and inculcate an institutional quality culture, because national accreditation frameworks are mostly enforced onto higher education institutions, which drives them to a more accountability-oriented focus than an improvement-oriented focus. Another concern raised by the management of higher education institutions is that they are challenged by tight timelines, hence it is almost impossible to work on and implement all the recommendations in review panel reports before the next visit from the EQA body; and some recommendations can only be implemented in the long-term, demanding substantial amounts of resources (Weir, 2009).

The challenges experienced by EQA bodies in the accreditation of programmes may have an indirect impact on higher education institutions, hence the researcher has regarded it important to briefly discuss this in the next section.

Challenges Pertaining to External Quality Assurance Bodies

In a study conducted by Waheed (2018) on the challenges experienced in regulating EQA in the Maldives, one of the biggest hampering factors highlighted was the slow progress between establishing the country's QAA and the promulgation of the Act that mandates the body to conduct EQA related activities. Waheed (2018) raised the concern that although there was a general agreement among higher education stakeholders on the significance to have a legal act in place that can guide the implementation of EQA in the Maldives, the deliberations did not cover the contents of such act neither the procedures for its implementation. This situation relates to the current Engineering Professions Act of 1986 in Namibia, passed by parliament, which does not specify clear roles and functions devoted to the accreditation of study programmes leading to engineering qualifications in Namibia (Engineering Professions Act 1986). Waheed's (2018) study also flagged a challenge that is a common phenomenon in EQA structures in many countries, i.e. influence from outside parties and political pressure. Regarding the latter, the ASG-QA states that it is crucial that the EQA body "makes independent decisions and judgements that are not subject to change by third parties ... (e.g. HEIs, governments, other stakeholders)" (AUC & EUC, 2018, p. 30), while the ESG states that "agencies should be independent and act autonomously ... have full responsibility for their operations and the outcomes of those operations without third party influence [from] higher education institutions, governments and other stakeholder organisations" (ENQA, 2015, p. 22). According to Martin (2016), it is unavoidable for EQA bodies to be entirely autonomous from their sources of funding, which in many cases is the government of the country; however, she reasoned that it is vital that these bodies remain independent in the outcomes and decisions they make concerning accreditation exercises for the sake of the agency's trustworthiness and standing in the national, regional, and international QA arena.

In addition, because there is no common agreement yet on what the concept quality entails (Bishoff, 2018; Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018), Valeikienė (2017) asserted that EQA bodies are confronted with a predicament when the QA agenda is determined by government authorities that try to satiate public demands for accountability and sometimes their own political benefits, and in pursuing this, they might be tempted to alter rules, guidelines, and definitions about what EQA bodies ought to assess and to what extent. Hence, Papanikolaou, Roussakis and Tzionas emphasised that “the role of organizations and agencies that could prevent political interference of governments and act as sources of legitimation of quality is crucial” (2020, p. 29).

Another big matter of concern for EQA bodies in the execution of their mandates, is the financial burden of conducting accreditation, covering a substantial number of programmes offered by various higher education institutions (Matei & Iwinska, 2016; McCurry, 2018; Simukungwe, 2018). The financial burden for the accreditation of professional programmes is reported to be even higher than that of academic programmes (PhillipsKPA, 2017). These bodies need to make budgetary provision for air tickets (covering domestic, regional, and international destinations), accommodation and meals, honoraria, and other contingency expenses for review panel members; and even sometimes include overtime payments for secretariat staff or compensation for part-time staff (McCurry, 2018; PhillipsKPA, 2017; Simukungwe, 2018). What is more, lack of local subject matter experts and QA practitioners makes the situation even bleaker and contributes to further escalation in costs for these bodies (Matei & Iwinska, 2016). Considering the huge expenses attached to accreditation, Simukungwe (2018) noted that where EQA bodies rely on donor support for their funding, which are not stable sources of income, the effectiveness, success, continuity, and viability of these bodies are compromised. McCurry (2018) stated that in

cases where EQA bodies are restricted to charge an accreditation fee, it puts financial pressure on executing accreditation functions, which can involve rather costly procedures.

Moreover, many EQA bodies do not have in place an approved appeals system with clear guidelines and procedures, hence these bodies are kind of vulnerable or at risk because they might grant accreditation status to a programme that should rightfully not be accredited, just so to avoid unnecessary costs if institutions threaten to take them to court for an outcome that is not to their satisfaction (McCurry, 2018). On the other hand, in countries where appeals systems are in place, it was reported that it might happen that EQA bodies hardly receive appeals, which might give the impression that these bodies are intentionally hesitant to refuse granting a programme accreditation status, since the appeals process is said to be burdensome and tapping the resources – financial, human and time – of EQA bodies (McCurry, 2018). According to the ASG-QA, it is a good EQA practice that higher education institutions are accorded the right to appeal formally against accreditation outcomes or processes that are not based on justifiable reasons (AUC & EUC, 2018).

In addition, the occurrence of panel members and/or staff from the EQA body's secretariat who appear to take an intimidating attitude towards staff of higher education institutions, was also reported (Simukungwe, 2018). Such occurrences might create tautness between institutional staff and EQA bodies, which might cause a detrimental effect on the purpose of EQA and lead to lower success levels in national QA endeavours to augment the quality of higher education systems (ibid.). Another significant challenge that EQA bodies encounter, according to Simukungwe (2018), is to attract the required number of staff who meet the job requirements and who are able and enthusiastic enough to take up the roles and functions of programme accreditation. Related to this predicament, Friedman et al. (2017) reported that with relatively high staff turnover rates,

EQA bodies are often confronted with administrative glitches such as lost correspondence and documents submitted by higher education institutions. centre

Benefits for Higher Education Institutions

The study conducted by PhillipsKPA (2017) reports how EQA contributes to upholding the quality of programmes with regards to course design, development and review, i.e.: (a) it guides curriculum developers and programme coordinators to craft well-defined programme learning outcomes and graduate attributes fit for the labour market; (b) it keeps faculty on their toes to continuously improve course design and review processes, and to timeously identify gaps in the curriculum; (c) it provides opportunities for faculty to network with peers serving on review panels and expand their pool of subject experts used for the purpose of benchmarking – echoed by Atibuni (2020) and Friedman et al. (2017); (d) it gives academics exposure to be part of review panels to gain experience from experts in the field – supported by Friedman et al. (2017); and (e) it proves that, through validation of the self-evaluation report and interaction with review panel members during the accreditation exercise, courses or modules are aligned to the latest practices in the labour market to ensure quality outputs. It was found that EQA processes have a heightening effect on the quality of teaching and learning (e.g., it encourages the creation of conducive teaching and learning environments, and sparks discussions on effective teaching, monitoring, and evaluation among academics), and contribute to greater transparency in institutional management procedures that makes the accreditation exercise worth going through for higher education institutions (Nyamwesa et al., 2020; Simukungwe, 2018).

Saeed et al. (2015) noted that EQA impels institutions to continuously assess their intended goals to keep abreast of not only the changing and fast-growing higher education landscape, but also the rapid developments and good practices in the QA field. For instance, Silva, Reich and

Gallegos (as cited in Simukungwe, 2018) reported that accreditation site visits cause higher education institutions to revise workloads for academic and administrative staff; motivate academics to publish peer-reviewed articles; and increase criteria and requirements for job entry level qualifications, staff appointments, and promotion of academic staff members. EQA motivates higher education providers to develop and nurture a culture of self-evaluation that will help detect areas that require corrective action; improve stakeholder accountability; and ensure that student wellbeing is protected (Simukungwe, 2018; Weir, 2009). Bishoff (2018) stated that a strong institutional quality ethos improves the chances for higher education institutions to be the first choice for the cream of the crop students. It also gives institutions an advantage to attract and appoint quality academic staff, according to PhillipsKPA (2017).

Some additional benefits of accreditation highlighted by Simukungwe (2018) include: recognition of institutions at national, regional, and international levels; the views of independent review panel members add value to an institution's academic offerings; surety that international credit transfers are authentic; and it comes in handy during the enrolment of prospective national and international students with foreign qualifications. Moreover, international recognition of graduates' learning abilities, experiences, and study programmes was also reported as a fundamental goal of accreditation in a study conducted by Berse (2018) on the harmonisation of higher education at the regional level in Asia and the Philippines.

In addition, Saeed et al. (2015) claimed that participation in EQA activities encourages higher education institutions to utilise human and financial resources wisely, and to earmark sufficient funds for teaching and learning, and academic support services rather than to spend money on activities that are not beneficial to students' learning experiences. They further stated that EQA contributes to staff being constantly on the lookout for innovative ways to use advanced

technology; engage in or sign up for training interventions on a continuous basis; and equip themselves with the skills fit for a professional to further enhance the quality of their institutional brands (ibid.).

Benefits for Students

As one of the key stakeholder groups in higher education, students should be involved in QA activities, IQA as well as EQA. One way of involving students in EQA processes is by allowing them to serve as members of review panels; a good practice not only instituted in developed QA systems (e.g., Europe) (Matei & Iwinska, 2016), but in developing systems too (e.g., Africa) (NCHE, 2009), which provides an opportunity to students to gain good experiences in QA in higher education (Ryan, 2015) and so getting involved in the quality of teaching and how it is managed in the institution (Simukungwe, 2018). It is argued that as representatives of the wider student community, these students can bring their own views to the table and provide valuable insights which others otherwise most probably would not have had considered, and which might have a progressive impact on the quality of their education (Palomares, 2014, as cited in Ryan, 2015). Exposing students to this type of opportunity is contributing to growing and honing their communication, critical thinking, and leadership skills; and it enables them to evaluate the quality of their study programmes more carefully and critically (ibid.).

In addition, higher education institutions have specific activities lined up that cater for student participation in the assessment and enhancement of their own learning experience as well as the improvement of the institution, i.e. taking part in service quality surveys and focus group interviews, participating in QA workshops and conferences, and joining task teams on QA issues (Ryan, 2015). For example, in response to the challenges that the outbreak of the novel Coronavirus, COVID-19, had on teaching and learning, NUST constituted an online

implementation committee that included representatives of the university's student body to allow students the opportunity to be involved in upgrading the quality of their education (NUST, 2020a). Materu (as cited in Simukungwe, 2018) claimed that the level of students' self-confidence and devotion to their studies and institution might be raised if their study programmes are accredited. Some benefits of professional accreditation, reported by PhillipsKPA (2017), are that it boosts the quality of the programmes and makes them more relevant to the profession, as it improves the job prospects and opportunities for graduates to move within the profession, nationally, regionally, and internationally. "Professional accreditation ensures that there is a high level of confidence in the academic content of the course and that it offers a sense of employability after graduation." (PhillipsKPA, 2017, p. 25)

Benefits for the Profession and the Public at Large

Friedman et al. (2017) claimed that, in terms of professional accreditation, EQA helps to ensure consistency in the application of professional standards, and it also creates opportunities for joint research and networking within a profession. If professional programmes are granted accreditation status, it provides some kind of surety to the public that graduates of those programmes are equipped with a "solid professional knowledge base through their studies" (PhillipsKPA, 2017, p. 25), hold the required qualifications and competencies to work in the particular profession, behave within the ambit of the profession's ethical values and principles (PhillipsKPA, 2017), and that the services provided by the particular profession will be of a high standard (Friedman et al., 2017). In addition, Atibuni (2020), supported by Simukungwe (2018), claimed that accredited programmes show that higher education institutions and EQA bodies have the public's interest at heart by protecting them from fake qualifications.

Summary

The chapter started with a discussion on two conceptual models considered to be useful in this investigation. The first one is the Conceptual Model of Quality, proposed by Schindler et al. (2015), which is centered around four main concepts of quality in higher education, i.e. quality as purposeful, quality as transformative, quality as exceptional, and quality as accountable (Elzagheid, 2019; Morales, 2019; Ryan, 2015). This conceptualisation of quality found its origin in a study conducted by Harvey and Green in 1993, which is regarded the most prominent experiential piece of research cited by numerous scholars in the discourse about quality in higher education, according to Van der Bank and Popoola (2014). Gover and Loukkola, (2018) concurred that these concepts are generally associated with the term quality in higher education, hence the researcher's interest to explore their applicability on the chosen study. The second framework is the Deming PDCA Cycle, a prototype of Dr William Edwards Deming, developed in the 1950s. The use of the PDCA Cycle as a framework for QA in higher education is said to gain increasing reputation in this sector (Asif & Raouf, 2013; Goubitz, 2011; Noda et al., 2018; Shokraiefard, 2011). Focusing on these two frameworks, the researcher attempted to combine the Conceptual Model of Quality with the PDCA Cycle as an exemplar to conduct this study. As part of the conceptual framework, the author deemed it imperative to define key concepts, such as quality, quality assurance, accreditation, etc., that are embedded in the QA language and that simultaneously provided a basis for the discussions in this investigation.

The perceptions and views of higher education institutions on the functions of EQA bodies as well as the experiences of EQA bodies concerning the accreditation or validation of programmes offered by higher education institutions were also elaborated. Shindi reported that

the overlapping mandates of especially the NCHE and NQA inexorably resulted in “an inefficient use of resources, and harms their credibility, accountability and effectiveness” (2018, p. 21), as both bodies accredit academic as well as professional programmes. These overlaps created misperceptions and contributed to decreased transparency among higher education institutions and other stakeholders. Moreover, Waheed (2018) accentuated that higher education institutions may be tempted to doubt QA standards and processes if these are not made known publicly and opened for stakeholders’ input. The submission of piles of evidence documents was reported that causes a secretarial encumbrance for higher education institutions because with every accreditation exercise conducted by each EQA body, institutions must prepare evidence files to be viewed and studied by review panels (Australian Physiotherapy Council, 2019). In addition, in a comparative study conducted by McCurry (2018) concerning the differences between the accreditation systems and processes applied by professional and QA regulatory bodies in Ireland, it was reported that the majority of the EQA bodies involved in the study were against mutual recognition of accreditation decisions. Considering the overlaps between the functions of the Namibian EQA bodies, this investigation was long overdue. On the positive side, Beccari and Rauret (2008) advocated for mutual recognition of accreditation, as it adds credibility to the QA processes of EQA bodies, avoids the need for multiple accreditations, and leads to growing recognition of qualifications in higher education – something that could be considered in the Namibian situation.

In terms of the impact of EQA on higher education institutions, Friedman et al. (2017) argued that accreditation by multiple EQA bodies may put double strain on institutional resources in terms of money, time, and human power. Other scholars in the field echoed this sentiment (Beerkens, 2018; Nyamwesa et al., 2020). Torre and Zapata’s (2013) investigation

further revealed that higher education institutions criticise EQA standards and processes, the induction of review panel members as well as the way in which and the time it takes for EQA bodies to approve accreditation outcomes, because each body applies a different approach to these activities. Leiber et al. (2018) found that if a programme is not accredited, the institution is bound for a period of two years post accreditation not to incorporate any improvements whatsoever in the curriculum. Such scenarios could be even worse in the case of Namibia if more than one EQA body decides to take this direction in terms of the outcome of programme accreditation. What is more, the financial, administrative, and academic effects of accreditation, including the efforts to achieve and retain approval and recognition of programmes, were also found to be strenuous on institutional resources (Friedman et al., 2017; Kelchen, 2017; Leiber et al., 2018; PhillipsKPA, 2017). Worth mentioning was that collaboration is important for Namibia's EQA bodies. In particular, the NCHE showed zeal to cooperate with counterparts to streamline the accreditation practices in higher education and curtail the weight on higher education institutions (NCHE, 2009). In its infancy stage of operation, the NCHE made concerted attempts to enter into an agreement with the NQA and, today, the two bodies have a signed MoU in programme accreditation. In addition, the NCHE has also an active MoU with ICAN, and the parties developed and already rolled out implementation of an integrated accreditation manual for new and continued accreditation applications for programmes in the field of chartered accounting. Moreover, consultations pertaining to areas of cooperation among the ECN, HPCNA, and the NCAQS were underway.

Looking at the relationship between IQA and EQA, some scholars argued that IQA and EQA cannot be separated, and that they can work together to lessen the burden on higher education institutions (Paintsil, 2016; Shawyun 2009). This kind of integrated approach might

work in the Namibian situation, as it might help to eliminate the overlapping functions between the NCHE, NQA, HPCNA, and ECN, and the negative effects on higher education institutions. EQA bodies and higher education institutions must pull their efforts to build credible higher education systems, as by themselves none of the two entities would be able to accomplish this goal. As part of the conceptual framework of this study, the PDCA Cycle can be linked with the two strands in QA in higher education, i.e., IQA and EQA. The improvement focus of IQA is consonant with the second phase in the PDCA Cycle of doing that requires higher education institutions to transform their internal operations to achieve quality enhancement, while the accountability principle of EQA is consistent with the fourth phase in the PDCA Cycle of acting that allows HEIs the opportunity to effect some changes by introducing enriched QA processes in response to greater public answerability, if so required (Asif & Raouf, 2013).

Finally, it is believed that the good practices expected to be reaped from EQA, yet remain indistinct (Weir, 2009). Higher education institutions are challenged by the fact that there seems to be no parallel networking and collaboration between EQA bodies to streamline EQA systems, practices, and processes, or to develop an efficient and independent peer-reviewed accreditation system, making conformance to EQA requirements even more daunting for higher education institutions. Lack of cooperation among EQA bodies may put unnecessary strain on higher education institutions to fulfil the requirements of each individual body, like in the case of Namibia. Orkodashvili (2013) argued that the absence of a unified accreditation system may encourage a breeding place for exploitation and unnecessary pressure on higher education institutions to comply with national and international QA requirements. What is more, EQA systems and processes are many at times perceived as being a burden, too dogmatic and stringent, and as such, draining individual and institutional capacity. In terms of challenges

pertaining to EQA bodies, Waheed (2018) raised the concern that sometimes the legislative framework of some bodies does not explicitly state their objectives and functions. This situation relates to the Engineering Professions Act of 1986 in Namibia, which does not specify clear roles and functions devoted to the accreditation of study programmes leading to engineering qualifications in Namibia.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHOD

Introduction

Governments and regulatory bodies are increasingly faced with demands for quality higher education to function competitively in the global market. The assurance of quality which was mainly regarded the sole responsibility of higher education institutions changed almost overnight to become the co-responsibility of higher education institutions and national QA bodies. Hence, there was an increasing need to evaluate and review the IQA of academic programmes and services through national, regional, and international QA regulatory frameworks (Magd & Kunjumammed, 2022). Therefore, the accreditation and audit of higher education programmes and services have become a valuable indicator of quality (Mahlangu & Sedio, 2022). Considering these developments, the Namibian government has established various national EQA bodies, viz. NQA, NCHE, HPCNA, and ECN, among other, to take charge of EQA in higher education through activities such as programme accreditation and institutional audits or accreditation. However, the creation of multiple EQA bodies in Namibia has inevitably resulted in the perception that there is an overlap in the functions mandated to these bodies through their respective Acts. Therefore, the execution of this investigation was triggered by the researcher's interest to delve into the rationale for the status quo.

The title of this qualitative case study is perceived overlapping functions of Namibia's EQA bodies and their effect on higher education institutions. The purpose of the inquiry was threefold: to explore the views of the higher education institutions, the EQAAs, and professional bodies concerning the mandates of the NQA, NCHE, HPCNA, and ECN; to explore the perceptions and views of the higher education institutions and the EQA bodies as regards the seemingly overlapping functions; and to establish what effects the overlapping programme accreditation

functions have on Namibia's higher education institutions. The study involved academic staff from various faculties at NUST and IUM as well as QA and Accreditation officers at the NQA, NCHE, and HPCNA. This investigation was conducted between 01 March and 22 June 2022, using semi-structured individual interviews. Document analysis was also applied to collect supplementary information about the phenomenon investigated.

The following three main research questions, further divided into sub-questions, guided the interviews: (1) what functions are the NCHE, NQA, HPCNA, and ECN mandated to undertake as per their respective legislations; (2) what are the perceptions and views of the higher education institutions and the EQA bodies as regards the seemingly overlapping functions; and (3) how do the overlapping functions of NCHE, NQA, HPCNA, and ECN affect Namibia's higher education institutions?

Non-probability sampling was used to draw a sample in a purposive or intentional way to include knowledgeable and information-rich individuals who shared their views, perspectives, and experiences on the perceived overlapping functions of the EQA bodies and how they affect higher education institutions. The data generated through the semi-structured individual interviews and the document analysis were analysed through CIRT's (2019) suggested data analysis steps and Kriukow's (2020) thematic analysis in Microsoft Word (see Figure 7).

Quality in higher education is often associated with four main concepts, e.g., quality as purposeful, quality as transformative, quality as exceptional, and quality as accountable (Elzagheid, 2019; Morales, 2019; Ryan, 2015). These four key concepts are rooted in Schindler's Conceptual Model of Quality (Schindler et al., 2015), which also formed the basis for this study together with the Deming PDCA Cycle (Noda et al., 2018). Hence, the researcher attempted to

combine the Conceptual Model of Quality with the PDCA Cycle as a prototype to propose an action plan that may help the EQA bodies to streamline their programme accreditation processes.

Furthermore, this chapter is based on several philosophical and methodological positions, which guided the approach, techniques, and tools used to conduct the investigation. The first part of the chapter discusses the research approach and design, providing details about the four parts of a paradigm, namely ontology, epistemology, methodology, and axiology/ethics, and the researcher's take on these in terms of the appropriateness of each one for this study. It also explains the types of research paradigms, i.e. positivist, interpretivist, critical and pragmatic paradigms, with an indication that the interpretivist research paradigm was found to be relevant to this study, as the researcher adopted a qualitative research design that is consonant with interpretivism. In addition, this part provides information about the different types of research designs, that is, qualitative, quantitative and mixed-methods research, and reasons why the researcher chose the qualitative research method for this inquiry.

The second part of the chapter delves into a description about the population, sample frame and size, sampling criteria, units of analysis, and sampling strategies that were most applicable to this study. The third part explains the origin, development, validity, and reliability of the research instruments used to collect data for this study. It also provides information about the pilot study conducted to test the quality of the research instruments.

In part four, the study procedures, ethical guidelines, protocols, and assurances are discussed. Here, issues of confidentiality and anonymity of the research subjects as well as the issues around protection from harm, informed consent, right to privacy, and related issues, are explained. It also includes a description of the procedures followed to gain formal approval to conduct the study. In addition, the role of the researcher in the investigation is highlighted. Finally,

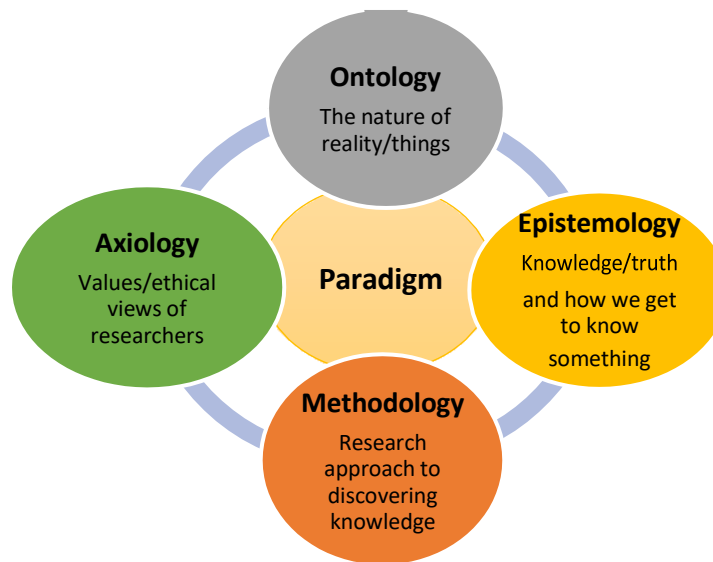
procedures followed to collect and analyse the data, are described. Also discussed in this part is how the researcher ensured trustworthiness and authenticity of the data.

Research Approach and Design

Any piece of research must be directed by a paradigm; a concept first used in 1962 by the American philosopher, Thomas Kuhn, which means “a philosophical way of thinking” (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017, p. 26). Denzin and Lincoln interpreted the word paradigm as “a basic set of beliefs that guide action” (2018, p. 195). Throughout her career as a QA expert (having been working at the NCHE as a QA officer for ten years and in her current job as a senior QA coordinator at NUST for the past seven years), the researcher has had various experiences concerning the perceived overlapping QA functions of the NQA, NCHE, HPCNA, and ECN. Hence, this study was conducted with the hope to trigger the long awaited and much needed action from the relevant authorities in Namibia to address the overlapping programme accreditation functions of the mentioned EQA bodies.

A research paradigm, according to DeCarlo (2018), is how we see and experience the world, or simply, as described by Makombe, “paradigms are world views” (2017, p. 3366). The researcher’s exposure as a QA expert in both IQA and EQA, and her knowledge, experiences and understanding of the functions of these EQA bodies further shaped her views about “what is to be ... scrutinized; the kinds of research questions to be asked and problems to be investigated; how to structure such research questions, what predictions can be made by the primary theory in that discipline; and how to interpret results” (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 34).

A paradigm has four parts: ontology, epistemology, methodology, and axiology/ethics (Cohen et al., 2018; Dammak, 2015; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Fuyane, 2021; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Leavy, 2017; Patel, 2015). Figure 6 presents the parts of a research paradigm.

Figure 6*Parts of a Research Paradigm*

Note: Adapted from “Research methodology choice dilemma: A conceptual note to emerging researchers,” by N. Fuyane, 2021, *International Journal of Business and Management Studies*, 2(2), p. 30 (DOI:10.4172/2162-6359.1000403).

Ontology

Ontology refers to the “nature of reality and the nature of things” (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 3); in other words, it dwells on what is the truth/facts about a certain phenomenon. Likewise, Denzin and Lincoln (2018) reasoned that ontology basically prompts questions about what realism and the nature of people in the world are; and what sense we can make of the topic under investigation (Brink, 2018). Through this investigation, the researcher attempted to establish the truth about and make sense of the seemingly overlapping programme accreditation functions of the NQA, NCHE, HPCNA, and ECN from the perspectives of the higher education institutions as well as the EQA bodies. Ontology can help researchers to confidently know and be sure that what

they investigate is in fact real and that they will be able to gain some sensible information from it (Keefe & Chapel, 2016; Keser & Köksal, 2017; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Leavy, 2017; Moon & Blackman, 2017).

Epistemology

Epistemology simply means knowledge (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017), and how people get to know something/the reality (Patel, 2015). While ontology denotes the opinions of reality, epistemology refers to the “ways of researching and enquiring into the nature of reality and the nature of things” (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 3); in other words, how we come to know about something; the ways of finding out the truth; and how we can differentiate between our beliefs and mere opinions and prove that they hold some level of truth and/or that we have a point (Keser & Köksal, 2017; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Steup & Ram, 2020; Wenning, 2009). Epistemology is key, as it helps researchers to ponder about their connection with the available information or the known (participants), and to build that level of confidence and sureness that their data is trustworthy (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

Since most of the participants in this study were known to the researcher and believed to be knowledgeable about the seemingly overlapping functions through their lived experiences with the programme accreditation systems and processes of the EQA bodies, the researcher regarded them reliable sources to collect the data for this investigation and to ultimately know the truth about how the overlapping functions affect Namibia’s higher education institutions. Additionally, the researcher’s ontological and epistemological beliefs assisted and guided her to get her thoughts around the problem that was investigated; the importance of the inquiry; and what approach to adopt to find answers to the research questions and come up with new knowledge that will contribute to and further clarify the solution to a topic that lays so close to her heart.

Methodology

Methodology involves the researcher's most suitable or best strategy/approach/plan, i.e. research design, techniques and procedures; gathering of existing facts, new information and participants' views; sampling methods and selection of participants; choice of research instruments; and data analysis to gain information about the topic under investigation or to find answers to the research question that will ultimately add to the existing body of knowledge (Almalki, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Patel, 2015). For this study, the researcher adopted an interpretivist qualitative approach, using purposeful sampling and in-depth semi-structured individual interviews, consisting of open-ended questions, to solicit the participants' perspectives, experiences, and understanding about the seemingly overlapping functions of the NQA, NCHE, HPCNA, and ECN and how they affect higher education institutions.

Axiology

Axiology entails the researchers' own values and opinions (Cohen et al., 2018), in other words, the ethics/morals/principles and views that they hold about their research, how they go about their investigation and the value they attach to their research results (Li, 2016). Basically, axiology, as described by Kivunja and Kuyini (2017), encompasses the ethical considerations of research such as assuring the confidentiality of participants, honouring the rights of participants, treating all participants the same, and safeguarding the data, among other. Due care was taken to adhere to these axiological principles as described in detail in the section that deals with study procedures and ethical assurances.

Furthermore, apart from the four basic parts of a research paradigm (ontology, epistemology, methodology and axiology), there are also various types of research paradigms that

can be applied in educational studies, i.e. positivist, interpretivist, critical and pragmatic paradigms (Al-Saadi, 2014; Cohen et al., 2018; Dammak, 2015; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Fuyane, 2021; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Leavy, 2017; Makombe, 2017; Patel, 2015). Cohen et al. (2018) emphasised the importance of paradigms to be fit for their intended purpose, meaning that scholars should confidently know which research paradigm would most appropriately guide their research (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017) to ensure it is structured clearly within a particular framework, as their philosophical position will guide their research design (Al-Saadi, 2014; Keser & Köksal, 2017; Makombe, 2017;).

The subsequent section is discussing the four research paradigms in detail, especially the positivist and interpretivist models, which are regarded as the two principal research paradigms (Fuyane, 2021).

Research Paradigms

Positivism. Auguste Comte, a French theorist, first introduced the concept positivism in the practise of research in the natural sciences (Dammak, 2015; Fuyane, 2021; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Leavy, 2017; Makombe, 2017). Researchers who operate within the parameters of the positivist paradigm depend on formulating and testing hypotheses or theories; reasoning in a deductive or logical fashion; focusing on numbers, quantifiable components and mathematical calculations; conducting cautious observation and measurement; are interested in cause-and-effect relations; drawing inferences; and generalising results (Almalki, 2016; Al-Saadi, 2014; Cohen et al., 2018; Dammak, 2015; Fuyane, 2021; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Tubey, Rotich & Bengat, 2015). Positivistic scholars view reality as being somewhere out there in the universe that ought to be discovered through traditional scientific techniques (Tubey et al., 2015). This paradigm is consistent with quantitative research that emphasises the testing of hypotheses in a world in which

beliefs of a single reality features heavily, and as stated by Cohen et al., in which “the researcher imposes the research on the phenomenon (i.e. top-down)” (2018, p. 34). For example, based on a broad statement or prediction (hypothesis), the researcher will gather data and evidence that may confirm or contradict that statement (Borgstede & Scholz, 2021; Lodico, Spaulding & Voegtler, 2010; Yang & Yoo, 2018). Thus, the rationale for research is driven by hypotheses or theories (Yilmaz, 2013).

Furthermore, positivism is a scientific research method that is perceived as quite dogmatic, as researchers are expected to sternly follow methodological rules and guidelines to produce objective and unbiased results that will reveal the reality about the subject under investigation (Makombe, 2017). For instance, researchers are required to strictly follow the basic research process used in the natural sciences, i.e. identifying the problem – formulating the hypothesis – putting forward propositions – verifying facts/results and – drawing conclusions (Xinping, 2002, as cited in Makombe, 2017). The ontological view of positivism is in its one true reality that can be epistemologically observed and measured in a quantifiable way by a neutral, independent, and objective researcher through quantitative research methodologies (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Fuyane, 2021).

Fuyane (2021) highlighted some of the strengths of the positivistic research paradigm such as its objective nature that helps to lessen possible influences by the beliefs of researchers on the responses or behaviour of their respondents. However, this paradigm is criticised for its inflexible or 100%-according-to-the-book research practices (Fuyane, 2021), and the possible exploitation and researcher influence of statistical tests (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). Considering the research problem, objectives, and research questions of this study, the positivist research paradigm was not regarded suitable, as the researcher explored the views, feelings, and perceptions of the participants

through their own experiences concerning the seemingly overlaps in the programme accreditation functions of the NQA, NCHE, HPCNA, and ECN, and how these affect Namibia's higher education institutions. Additionally, this study did not involve any experiments, but rather tried to find out how participants perceived the topic investigated using one-on-one discussions.

Interpretivism/Constructivism. This paradigm, sometimes dubbed anti-positivism (E-International Relations, 2021; Wicks & Freeman, 1998), is the total opposite of the positivist paradigm and is consonant with qualitative research. Scholars in the interpretivist/constructivist arena described this worldview “as the belief that ‘facts’ are not things out in some objective world waiting to be discovered, but, rather, are the social constructions of humans who apprehend the world through interpretive activity” (Ferguson, 1993, as quoted in Makombe, 2017, p. 3370). This research was based on the interpretivist research paradigm, because the phenomenon investigated was influenced by the viewpoints, explanations, and experiences of the participants.

Hence, there was a need for the researcher to construe and report the participants' knowledge, understanding, views, and true feelings about the perceived overlaps in the programme accreditation functions of the EQA bodies. According to Leavy (2017) and others (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Cohen et al., 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Lodico et al., 2010; Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022), researchers draw from and appreciate their participants' personal or subjective perceptions and explanations of their experiences and the environments in which they live, which eliminates the conception that knowledge is discovered (Al-Saadi, 2014). The selected academics from the higher education institutions and the QA and Accreditation officers from the EQA bodies, which were the research participants in this study, brought in-depth meaning and a richer gist to the investigation, because QA and programme accreditation form an integral part of their day-to-day work operations.

The aim of research in an interpretivist approach is to gain understanding of the problem under investigation from the perspective of and through the lenses of the participants themselves on an individual basis (which leans towards Piagetian constructivism), or as a group (which leans towards Vygotskyian constructivism) in a universe where there is not a single, but multiple realities (Cohen et al., 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Essays, UK, 2018a; Olusegun, 2015). The Piagetian constructivist notion was employed for this study, as the data was collected through one-on-one interviews with participants drawn from Namibia's higher education institutions and EQA bodies to accommodate the diverse realities, feelings, and interpretive opinions of the interviewees regarding the effects of these overlapping programme accreditation functions on the country's higher education institutions.

The interpretivist research paradigm depends on a bottom-up strategy (Borgstede & Scholz, 2021; Cohen et al., 2018; Lodico et al., 2010). For example, the research process for this investigation commenced with an identified research problem – formulation of research questions – drawing of a sample – collection of data through individual interviews and document analysis and – analysis of the data through inductive/logical reasoning (Madison, 2016; Yilmaz, 2013). The stance of interpretivism in relation to ontology and epistemology is that interpretivists believe that there are multiple realities backed by different perceptions and interpretations where researchers portray a high regard for ethics, using qualitative research methodologies (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Fuyane, 2021).

Brink (2018) claimed that multiple realisms are born from social interaction between individuals. Through her own knowledge and experience of the various QA functions in higher education, the researcher believes that programme accreditation exercises present opportunities for higher education institutions and EQA bodies to interact and communicate in an informal way,

thus the study involved participants from both the higher education sector and the EQA bodies to gain an understanding of how individual participants felt and construed their experiences about the perceived overlapping functions of the NQA, NCHE, HPCNA, and the ECN and how the overlaps affect higher education institutions. This was done by employing the constructivist paradigm.

Some of the strengths that interpretivism can draw on are that it gathers information based on the meanings, personal views, and feelings of individuals that enrich the validity of data; and it is more receptive to contexts by studying phenomena in their natural environments, respecting the needs of their participants (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Fuyane, 2021). For instance, the interviews conducted for this study were facilitated via MS Teams and Zoom, which allowed the participants to either do it from the comfort of their homes or offices on a date and time most convenient for them. In consideration of the needs of the participants and upon their requests, some of the interviews were even conducted during weekends. On the other hand, researchers (Cohen et al., 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Leavy, 2017) pointed to one major weakness of this paradigm, i.e. the results are not generalisable.

The interpretivist research paradigm was relevant to this study as the researcher adopted a qualitative research design that is consonant with interpretivism. The individualistic, inductive, informational, and naturalistic nature of this method allowed the researcher to study the phenomenon in its natural environment to disclose, in narrative form, the meanings of the participants' experiences concerning the perceived overlapping programme accreditation functions and their effect on higher education institutions. This research paradigm was preferred over the positivist research model that hinges on epistemological dualism (Park, Konge & Artino, 2019), because the researcher (knower) and her participants (known) closely interacted with each other and engaged on a personal level through individual interviews (although not in a face-to-face

fashion, but via MS Teams and Zoom, which allowed for a personal conversation with all participants).

Critical/Transformative Paradigm. Scholars associated with this school of thought view research from a political perspective with the aim to empower and liberate participants (Cohen et al., 2018; Leavy, 2017; Romm, 2015). This worldview is also known as the participatory paradigm, as researchers often work in collaboration with participants to transform the conditions of life of marginalised and oppressed individuals or groups for the better (Cohen et al., 2018; Leavy, 2017; Romm, 2015). Researchers who are intrigued by investigating pressing social problems that involve marginalised members of society, such as women, the disabled, ethnic minority groups, and people who live in poverty, would opt for the critical research paradigm for their study (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Mertens, 2009; Romm, 2015). Furthermore, according to Matjila and Van der Merwe (2021), the transformative paradigm arose to address and put right the limitations of positivism and constructivism.

Additionally, this paradigm is contrasting traditional theorists who explore and confirm the existing situation, because researchers in this camp dare the status quo and attempt to bring about a balanced and autonomous society in which the marginalised can benefit equally (Asghar 2013). This research paradigm was not suitable for this investigation, because the research did not try to improve the position of any marginalised group but was rather interested to find out whether the findings about the perceived overlapping programme accreditation functions are in line with the reality as constructed by the researcher and the participants.

Pragmatism. The pragmatic research paradigm allows for the use of a mixture of quantitative and qualitative research methods in the same study. In support of this paradigm, Cohen et al. argued that both quantitative and qualitative methods can be applied in one single study “as

long as they ‘work’ – succeed – in answering the research question or problem, and in which the researcher employs both inductive and deductive reasoning to investigate the multiple, plural views of the problem and the research question” (2018, p. 34). Leavy (2017) further stated that scholars have high regard for the effectiveness of the pragmatic paradigm, as this approach has proven to work in different research contexts and can just add value to the outcome of a study. Moreover, philosophers who are in favour of this paradigm contended that such worldview was needed to make room for more than one research approach regarded to be most fitting for the topic under investigation (Cohen et al., 2018; Fuyane, 2021; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Leavy, 2017).

Since the researcher opted exclusively for a qualitative design, the pragmatic paradigm was deemed not appropriate for this investigation. Almalki (2016) noted that there is no correct or incorrect way for carrying out a particular investigation; however, the nature of the study or particular circumstances will definitely direct the researcher to adopt the most fitting research design, i.e. a qualitative, quantitative, or a mixture of the two main approaches, namely mixed-methods research (Baškarada & Koronios, 2018; Makombe, 2017; Yilmaz, 2013). The next section is discussing the two main research designs, viz. quantitative and qualitative methods.

Research Designs

Fundamental issues to consider when choosing a research design include the type of research topic or area to be examined, the researcher’s own knowledge and understanding concerning the problem, and the participants of the study (Creswell, 2014).

Quantitative Research. Quantitative research is based on an objectivist epistemology that pursues the development of descriptive common laws and rules in social behaviours by gauging statistically what is postulated to be a single fixed reality (Almalki, 2016; Borgstede & Scholz, 2021; Fuyane, 2021; Leavy, 2017; Yilmaz, 2013). Quantitative researchers are interested in

predictions, extrapolations, generalisation of results, collecting numerical data, and the measurement and analysis of causal relationships through logical or deductive thinking (Basanta, 2020; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Lodico et al., 2010; Yilmaz, 2013). The knower and the known operate in a comparatively separate and independent environment (Yilmaz, 2013) where researchers are required to keep their distance from their subjects so that their likes, or dislikes, character, principles, and views do not influence the results, but rather reflect the true nature of the data (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

Furthermore, Yilmaz (2013), supported by Almalki (2016) and Christensen, Johnson, and Turner (2015), noted that quantitative methods call for the use of pre-developed homogeneous surveys or questionnaires with set or pre-determined categories of answers which large groups of participants, randomly sampled, are expected to choose from according to their own views and experiences. Quantitative research is based on ‘what’ questions to discover, elucidate, and prognosticate the hypothesised relationships between variables (Fuyane, 2021; Lune & Berg, 2017).

Since the quantitative research design focusses on the use of surveys with pre-constructed answer categories, administered to a large population, this method of research was not deemed fitting for the current study, as this investigation made use of individual interviews, using exploratory open-ended questions (Cohen et al., 2018) with a small group of participants, purposefully sampled to collect in-depth information from each participant in their own words and according to their own lived experiences about the seemingly overlapping functions of Namibia’s EQA bodies and their effect on higher education institutions.

Qualitative Research. Qualitative research is defined as “an umbrella term covering an array of interpretive techniques, which seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to

terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world” (Van Maanen, 1979, as cited in Rahman, 2017, p. 103). In other words, it is a methodical scientific inquest that tries to build a complete, mainly chronicle, picture to enlighten the researcher’s understanding of a social or cultural phenomenon (Astalin, 2013; Essays, UK, 2018b). In contrast with the quantitative research design that is underpinned by an objectivist epistemology, qualitative research methods are supported by a subjectivist epistemology which “accepts multiple [individual] stories, narratives, circumstances, perceptions and interpretations in understanding a reality” (Fuyane, 2021, p. 32) by means of inductive reasoning. The subjective interpretation of this study can be ascribed to the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of the participants influenced by their colleagues and other stakeholders in QA in higher education with whom they interact daily within their different workplaces or professional contexts.

However, it is not as much about the experiences of each participant, but rather the way in which each interviewee interpreted, shared, and discussed their perspectives and experiences with the interviewer, as each interviewee had their own feelings, thoughts, and understanding of the effects these overlapping functions have on Namibia’s higher education institutions. Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) concurred with this view, because they believe that the phenomenon under study cannot be grasped from the perceptions and interpretations of one person, but that there are multiple realities that can be explored through direct conversations and social interaction between the researcher and the research participants, therefore one-on-one interviews were employed for this inquiry to give the researcher and the participants an opportunity to engage on a personal level. Interpretive research is consistent with qualitative research (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), and this is the approach that was used for this study. In addition, Keser and Köksal (2017) claimed that in educational research, qualitative research methods produce

more trustworthy outcomes, as the inquiry concerns qualitative variables such as the opinions and perceptions of the participants.

Furthermore, qualitative research is normally used to answer questions about the composite nature of phenomena, often with the purpose of describing and understanding the phenomena from the participant's point of view (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). Thus, this study explored the views, experiences, and feelings that academic staff members, including QA and accreditation staff from the EQA bodies, hold with regards to the alleged overlapping programme accreditation functions and their effect on higher education institutions. The use of a qualitative research design is justified because there was a need to seek clarity and gain a better understanding about the functions of the EQA bodies, which would not have been possible without an in-depth probing into the views and experiences obtained directly from the participants (Azungah, 2018). A qualitative research approach was preferred over a quantitative approach, since the study did not have a numerical focus, but rather tried to establish, analyse, and explain if and why the functions of these bodies overlap, and what the perceptions of the higher education institutions and the EQA bodies are pertaining to the perceived overlaps. Because qualitative research is said to be subjective and allows the researcher to be an integral part of the data collection, it is often criticised that the researcher's own personal views can influence the research (Andrade, 2009; Astalin, 2013; Essays, UK, 2018b). However, since the researcher has vast knowledge and experience in the field of programme accreditation in higher education, due care had been taken to remain objective, and uphold and respect the views and opinions of the participants.

One of the most common types of qualitative research designs used, is case studies. Astalin defined case studies as “analyses of persons, events, decisions, periods, projects, policies, institutions, or other systems that are studied holistically by one or more methods” (2013, p. 122).

A case study is also described as an occurrence (happening, incident, or instance), or element of something, and can be an object, individual, a group, resolution, deed, place, or site, like a community or geographical area, a nation, or a sovereign state (Cohen et al., 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Schoch, 2020; Takahashi & Araujo, 2020). In addition, a case study allows the researcher to investigate a case or occurrence within its natural setting (Cohen et al., 2018; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019).

In this single case study, the researcher investigated the occurrence related to the overlaps in the programme accreditation functions of Namibia's EQA bodies that are a concern for higher education institutions for the past fifteen years. The reason why a single case study as opposed to a comparative case study was selected is because the focus was not on the generalisation of the research findings or to compare different cases within or across settings (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017; Goodrick, 2014). "Comparative case studies cover two or more cases in a way that produces more generalizable knowledge about causal questions [and] often incorporate both qualitative and quantitative data." (Goodrick, 2014, p. 1) This study was conducted using a qualitative research design.

In case studies, researchers are interested in answering the 'why' and 'how' questions (Azungah, 2018; Fuyane, 2021; Lune & Berg, 2017; Yin, 2018). Therefore, in this investigation, the researcher studied and analysed the reasons why there is a perception that the functions, legislations, QA systems, and programme accreditation and validation processes of the NCHE, NQA, HPCNA, and ECN overlap, and how the issue can be addressed with the input of the participants' views about and experiences with these EQA bodies' QA functions. Case studies are purported to generate rich data and a "vivid description of events relevant to the case" (Cohen et

al., 2018, p. 376) that cannot ordinarily be obtained through other methods (Alpi & Evans, 2019; Astalin, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Fuyane, 2021).

Some of the downsides of case studies, according to proponents of quantitative research, are that they lack thoroughness (Andrade, 2009), and that research results cannot be generalised. However, they often overlook the reason why the case was investigated in the first place and how the lessons learned are put into practice (Alpi & Evans, 2019). Considering the latter, the researcher tried to propose a plan of action that would simplify the programme accreditation systems and processes of the EQA bodies that will best suit Namibia's higher education system.

Identifying the target population and selecting the sample for the research study is a critical component that the researcher considered with great care. The subsequent section provides insight into the population and sample of this investigation.

Population and Sample of the Research Study

In research, the term population denotes all persons to whom the research criteria apply and on whom the research findings can be applied, the total population that conclusions can be drawn about, or all the individuals, groups, entities, or occurrences of a particular type that a researcher tries to understand, or about which a researcher attempts to find knowledge or data (Allen, 2017; Casteel & Bridier, 2021; Given 2008; Shukla, 2020). As it is not practical to include an entire population in a study, a sample is normally selected. A sample is a smaller group, portion, or subset of the target population in a study (Cohen et al., 2018; Given, 2008). Cohen et al. noted that the sample should be selected in such a way that the data obtained "is representative of the total population ... under study" (2018, p. 202).

Description of the Population

Table 2

Description of the Population

Population of the Study	
- Public and private higher education institutions in Namibia	- EQA bodies in Namibia
- Academics involved in programme and institutional accreditation or audits	- QA staff responsible for programme accreditation and institutional accreditation or audits

The population in this study included the academic staff members at Namibia's public and private higher education institutions, who were directly or indirectly involved in programme accreditation and institutional accreditation/audits at their respective institutions. For the purpose of this study, direct involvement in programme accreditation means having been involved in this exercise from the outset, that is, from the preparation of the self-evaluation report, provision of related evidence documentation in support of the self-evaluation report, evaluation of the credentials of suggested review panel members, organisation of relevant academic staff for the review panels' interviews, and participation in the interviews up and until attendance of the review panels' preliminary verbal feedback sessions; whereas indirect involvement includes activities such as participation in the review panels' interviews and attendance of the preliminary verbal feedback sessions. Also included in the population of this study were the QA staff at the country's EQA bodies, responsible for programme accreditation and institutional accreditation or audits. A sample was drawn from the population, as it was nearly impossible to collect information from all these individuals.

Sampling Frame

According to Given (2008), a sampling frame describes the individuals of the population who qualifies or who are suitable to form part of the sample. It is also defined as a list of the actual members of the target population from which the sample will be selected (Taherdoost, 2016; Wilmot, 2005). The sample of this study was drawn from the academic staff members at Namibia's two public universities, i.e. UNAM and NUST, and one private university, namely the International University of Management (IUM). At the three universities, the sampling frame consisted of deputy deans for teaching and learning and head of departments or programme coordinators, as they are normally the staff members who are directly involved in programme accreditation exercises. Not included in the sampling frame were the deans of the faculties and the deputy deans for research and innovation, as these staff members are not directly involved in programme accreditation. The sampling frame also included QA and Accreditation officers at the NQA, NCHE, HPCNA, and ECN responsible for academic and/or professional programme accreditation at these respective EQA bodies. They are staff who work in the QA sections at these EQA bodies and who are, by virtue of their positions, directly involved in the logistical arrangements and site visits for programme accreditation exercises carried out by the EQA bodies at higher education institutions. Although the management of these EQA bodies are conversant with the particulars of programme accreditation, they were excluded from the sample as well as the QA officers dealing with institutional accreditation/audits, as they are not directly involved in the programme accreditation exercises. Furthermore, the sample included males and females between the ages of 30 and 65.

Sample Size

In general, the size of samples in qualitative research is likely to be small (Given, 2008; Kumar, Kumar, Govindaraj & Prabhu, 2020; Schoch, 2020) “to support the depth of case-oriented analysis that is fundamental to this mode of inquiry” (Vasileiou, Barnett, Thorpe & Young, 2018, p. 18). Kumar et al. (2020) motivated the use of small samples in qualitative research, because the generalisation of results is not important nor the representativeness of participants’ views to the total population. These researchers, supported by others (Mocănașu, 2020; Vasileiou et al., 2018), claimed that scholars in the qualitative research camp reason that there are no clear or direct guidelines on the number of participants to include in a sample, and that it is rather the type of epistemology, methodologies, and other practicalities adopted by the researcher that guide the sample size in a qualitative study.

Some studies proposed the following sample sizes for qualitative research that involves one-on-one interviews: Ritchie, Lewis and Elam (2003) noted that not more than 50 interviews are conducted to enable researchers to cope with the intricacy of collecting and analysing the data; Wilmot (2005) suggested between 20 to 50 interviews; Aguboshim (2021) recommended from 20 to 40 interviews, while Dworkin (as cited in Kumar et al., 2020) suggested 25 to 30 interviews. In line with these proposals, the sample of this study comprised 46 participants: 36 male and female faculty members from the three universities, consisting of six deputy deans for teaching and learning (or the equivalent position) and six head of departments or programme coordinators from the three universities each; and 10 staff from the EQA bodies, comprising three QA officers at NQA and NCHE each, plus two accreditation officers at HPCNA and ECN each.

However, although the researcher sent gatekeeper letters to all three universities (UNAM, NUST, and IUM) and four EQA bodies (NQA, NCHE, HPCNA, and ECN) to obtain permission

from the respective heads of these institutions to involve their staff in this study, unfortunately one university and one EQA body never responded to the request, even though the researcher made several attempts to follow up via phone calls with the relevant offices at these institutions. Nevertheless, receipt of the gatekeeper letters was acknowledged in both cases. This situation reduced the sample size to 32, i.e. 12 academics from NUST; 12 academics from IUM; 3 accreditation officers from NQA; 3 QA officers from NCHE; and 2 accreditation officers from HPCNA. At the universities, 2 academics were drawn from six faculties at each institution. However, at NUST, the six faculties were restructured into four faculties from which the 12 academics were selected.

In addition, one other important aspect that guides the sample size in qualitative research is the notion of data saturation (Aguboshim, 2021; Boddy, 2016; Hennink & Kaiser, 2021; Malterud, Siersma & Guassora, 2016; Marshall, 1996). Saturation in qualitative research refers to that stage where further interviews or dialogues do not disclose any new facts, categories, or themes in the data obtained (Boddy, 2016; Hennink & Kaiser, 2021; Kumar et al., 2020; Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan & Hoagwood, 2015). Aguboshim (2021) claimed that data saturation can be reached with a sample size of 34, 16, 15, 14, 10 and even 9. To follow the principle of data saturation, the researcher paid careful attention to the data collected as progress was made with interviewing the chosen participants to save time and to eliminate the possible repetition of information and emergence of the same themes. Out of the 32 invitations extended to the academics at the two remaining higher education institutions and QA and Accreditation officers at the three EQA bodies, 20 participants (13 females and 7 males) accepted the invitation for the individual interviews.

However, the researcher felt that data saturation was reached after the 17th interview was conducted, as no new facts, categories, or themes emerged in the data obtained up and until that stage. Nonetheless, to improve data saturation, three additional interviews were conducted with two academics and one QA and Accreditation officer after the first round of interviews. Having commenced the task of transcribing the first round of interviews, the three additional interviews were a last desperate attempt from the side of the researcher to convince the participants, who initially agreed to participate in the study but could not honour their promise due to work and other commitments, to finally have the interviews. Email invitations were resent to the three individuals and the interviews were conducted virtually via MS Teams and Zoom. The three additional interviews did not deliver any new themes or categories.

All the interviews were audio recorded, with the consent of the participants, using the built-in recording function of MS Teams and Zoom, and the MS Word 365 transcribing feature was utilised to transport the responses and transcribe the interviews. The researcher downloaded the interview transcripts followed by thorough editing against the audio recordings. This was a time-consuming process, but it put the researcher at ease that the actual words, comments, and feelings of the participants could be captured verbatim. Having done the final transcription and editing herself provided the researcher the opportunity to engage with the raw data on a personal level.

Furthermore, to strengthen the saturation of data even more and to increase the reliability and trustworthiness of the data obtained during the semi-structured individual interviews, all twenty interview transcripts were returned to the participants for member checking and to confirm the accuracy of the information they provided (Aguboshim, 2021; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Aguboshim (2021) argued that member checking is a valuable way of enriching data saturation, as participants can scrutinise, correct, add, and approve the information they provided during

interviews. When the transcripts were shared with the interviewees of this study, a few participants indeed corrected information that was misunderstood by the researcher and suggested that some of the responses be moved to questions where they were more fitting. A few deletions were also proposed, which the researcher effected accordingly.

Research Context

The universities (main campuses) as well as the EQA bodies involved in this study are situated in the country's capital city, Windhoek. Participants were drawn from the following faculties at the main campuses of the universities: NUST (Faculty of Computing and Informatics; Faculty of Health, Applied Sciences and Natural Resources; Faculty of Commerce, Human Sciences and Education; Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment); and IUM (Faculty of Business Administration; Faculty of Education; Faculty of Health Sciences; Faculty of Information and Communication Technology; Faculty of Strategic Management and Leadership; and Faculty of Tourism, Hospitality and Events Management). Concerning the EQA bodies (NQA, NCHE, and HPCNA), the participants were selected from their respective QA units/sections.

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis in qualitative research is defined as the occurrence, case, entity, or person, group, process, human or lived experience, or case that is under investigation (Casteel & Bridier, 2021; Nobongoza, 2019). The unit of analysis in this study was the perceptions and experiences of the deputy deans for teaching and learning, and head of departments or programme coordinators at NUST and IUM as well as the QA and Accreditation officers at the NQA, NCHE, and HPCNA on the perceived overlapping functions of Namibia's EQA bodies and their effect on higher education institutions, collected through semi-structured individual interviews.

Sampling Techniques and Procedures

The process involved in choosing a sample or smaller group from the entire population in a study is known as sampling (Given, 2008; Salkind, 2010; Shukla, 2020; Taherdoost, 2016; Wilmot, 2005). Probability and non-probability sampling are two main techniques or methods applied in research.

Probability Sampling. Probability sampling is applied mainly in quantitative inquiries. As a non-biased sampling technique, it accords all the entities in the target population an equal opportunity to be included in the sample, and upon data analysis, allows for conclusions to be drawn about the target population (Casteel & Bridier, 2021; Shukla, 2020; Taherdoost, 2016). Non-probability sampling, on the other hand, is used in qualitative studies. This sampling technique does not afford a fixed possibility to all entities in the target population to be included in the sample (Casteel & Bridier, 2021). The sample is drawn in a subjective and biased fashion as per the desire of the researcher (Shukla, 2020), and results are not generalisable to the entire population (Taherdoost, 2016).

Non-probability Sampling. Non-probability sampling was used because it is ordinarily associated with qualitative research. This type of sampling technique provides the opportunity to echo and carefully analyse the responses of the participants (Devault, 2019; Dudovskiy, 2019a; Surbhi, 2017). Purposive sampling, which is a type of non-probability sampling and regarded a fundamental characteristic of qualitative research (Cohen et al., 2018), was chosen for this study.

Purposive Sampling. There are different types of purposive sampling methods, that is, maximum variation sampling, homogeneous sampling, extreme/deviant case sampling, critical case sampling, and expert sampling. Homogeneous sampling was applied in this qualitative case study. This type of sampling method was used because it is applied in cases where the

characteristics of a particular population suit the topic under investigation, or when a relatively small sample with similar traits or backgrounds and experiences is needed for in-depth discussions on the research topic (Dovetail Editorial Team, 2023; Shaheen, Pradhan & Ranajee, 2019; Thomas, 2022).

This sampling technique was chosen because the researcher could mindfully identify and intentionally or flagrantly select conversant persons who have detailed knowledge, understanding, and experience about the functions of the EQA bodies, because of their involvement in programme accreditation in their respective institutions. The participants of this study included deputy deans for teaching and learning, head of departments or programme coordinators, and QA and Accreditation officers. The ability of the participants to communicate in an eloquent, open, and thoughtful way was evenly important (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016; Palinkas et al., 2015).

Since the researcher is working in the higher education fraternity for several years, and more specifically in the QA environment, she knew most of the participants selected for this study. Hence, the sample was drawn in the following way: (i) upon approval by the Research Ethics Committee (UREC) of Unicaf University in Zambia to conduct the study, and consent was obtained from the universities and the EQA bodies for their involvement in the study, the researcher sent emails to the deans of the faculties at NUST and IUM as well as to the unit/section heads at the NQA, NCHE, and HPCNA to inform them that permission was obtained from the heads of their respective institutions to involve their staff in the study; (ii) staff that fit the sampling criteria were identified; and (iii) emails were sent to the identified individuals to determine their availability and willingness to participate in the study.

The approved UREC ethical clearance application, the gate keeper letter, and the letter of permission issued by the heads of the respective institutions were attached to the email invitations.

Where necessary, the email invitations were followed up telephonically to confirm the availability of the participants. In the case of the HPCNA, the consent letter suggested three names with contact details of staff in its QA unit who suit the sampling criteria and whom the researcher could invite to participate in the study. As the QA and Accreditation officers at the HPCNA were not known to the researcher, this information was useful and allowed the researcher to pick and invite two staff members from the list for the interviews. In the case of the NQA, eight names of QA and Accreditation officers were proposed of whom the researcher picked and invited three staff members for the interviews. Similarly, at IUM, the same selection method was used after the deans of the various faculties provided the researcher with lists of names and contact details of academic staff who fit the sampling criteria. In terms of NUST and NCHE, the researcher identified the individuals herself since they were known to her.

While purposive sampling offers more detailed, depth, and thorough information than probability sampling, it is claimed that it offers “less breadth” (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 2018) to the research than probability sampling, as the sample is habitually small, not representative of the larger population, and the results cannot be generalised to the entire population. However, irrespective of these drawbacks, the researcher counted on the advantages highlighted by some researchers (Dudovskiy, 2019a; Etikan et al., 2016; Taherdoost, 2016) in using purposive sampling, which are to focus on information-rich people who meet the sampling criteria, have time, are prepared, and are in a better position to contribute unique and valuable data to the topic under investigation; and it saves costs and time. Additionally, purposive sampling may provide opportunities for exploratory research, which will provide the basis that will inform future investigations (Dudovski, 2019a; Taherdoost, 2016).

Furthermore, Casteel and Bridier claimed that there could be a chance for “limited generalizability based upon the concept of proximal similarity in which the results are generalizable to a broader audience to the extent that the population exhibits similar characteristics to the sample” (2021, p. 350). Although the results of this study might not be generalisable, the researcher leaned on this claim to argue for a slight chance of close similarity with or transferability to the larger population (Barnes, Conrad, Demont-Heinrich, Graziano, Kowalski, Neufeld, Zamora & Palmquist, 2012; Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Naeem, 2019; Trochim, 2008; Williams, 2016).

The population of this study included the academic staff at Namibia’s public and private higher education institutions who were directly or indirectly involved in programme accreditation and institutional accreditation/audits as well as the QA staff at the EQA bodies responsible for programme accreditation and institutional accreditation/audits. Therefore, the conclusions of this study might be, however not with a certainty, transferred to other faculty members at other higher education institutions who are involved or will be involved in programme accreditation in the future.

The next section discusses the development and approval of the research instruments as well as the data collection methods used in this study.

Materials/Instrumentation of Research Tools

A case study is claimed to be a vastly flexible research design because it allows the use of a variety of data collection methods, from interviews (focus groups or individual/one-on-one), observations, and surveys, to document analysis, among other (Astalin, 2013; Cohen et al., 2018; Davies, 2011; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Instrumentation of data collection tools is a fundamental element of the data collection process. Salkind (2010) described instrumentation as the tools or methods by which researchers try to measure variables or learn more about something or someone

of interest during the data-gathering phase, while Bitonio (2014) defined it as the process of designing research tools that could be used fittingly to collect information on the research topic. A research instrument is a tool used by researchers to gather data from research participants (Salkind, 2010; Yaya, 2014) with the purpose of helping them to answer the goals and objectives of the investigation as well as the research questions (DiscoverPhDs, 2020).

Interviews, questionnaires, and observations are among the most popular traditional instruments used in research studies (Annan, 2019; Bitonio, 2014; Canals, 2017; Trigueros, 2017; Zohrabi, 2013). While questionnaires are generally employed in quantitative studies, interviews and observations are used in qualitative studies.

Interviews

According to Cohen et al. (2018), interviews are social interactive meetings where two or more than two individuals exchange opinions about a subject that concerns them all. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) defined the term as a direct conversation in which the interviewer or researcher tries to solicit information (the views, feelings, and perceptions) from an interviewee or interviewees about a particular topic. Interviews are believed to be the nub of qualitative data collection (Fornaro, Sterin & Struloeff, 2021; Zohrabi, 2013), are regularly applied in education (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), and are generally used with small samples chosen in a purposive way (Annan, 2019), like in the case of the current study. Hence, the rationale for choosing interviews as a data collection method for this study. In addition, interviews are pliable data collection instruments, as they allow participants to share multi-sensory experiences, viz. what they have heard, seen, and physically felt in a verbal or even written manner, e.g., email interviews, (Cohen et al., 2018).

Furthermore, quantitative and qualitative questions can be posed in an interview, but since qualitative questions are open-ended and allow the participants to share their perceptions and experiences in their own words and in their own manner (Cohen et al., 2018; Doody & Noonan, 2013), open-ended questions were used to obtain rich quality data (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012) about the participants' perspectives, feelings, and understanding about the overlapping programme accreditation functions of the NQA, NCHE, HPCNA, and ECN and how they affect Namibia's higher education institutions. In line with the latter argument, Creswell (2012) stated that open-ended questions create an opportunity for participants to best share their feelings, perceptions, and experiences free from the investigator's views or possible influence by former research results; participants can then decide freely in which way they wish to answer questions. Furthermore, interviews in qualitative research have both advantages and disadvantages.

Advantages of Interviews. Through interviews, valuable data can be collected personally from the interviewees; participants can provide personal information in a comprehensive manner; matters can be discussed in depth; and pre-determined questions can be posed to gather specific information that gives the interviewer a better grip on the kinds of information received (Annan, 2019; Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Zohrabi, 2013).

Disadvantages of Interviews. Some of the disadvantages highlighted by Creswell (2012) and others (Cohen et al., 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018) are that the interviewer may opt to record the interview that would require acquisition of the relevant equipment (e.g., voice recorder) and software to transcribe the interview, and such equipment can be costly and should be obtained well in advance. In the case of this study, the built-in recording functions of MS Teams and Zoom were used to record the interviews, and the researcher used the MS Word 365 Transcriber to transcribe

all the interviews. Thus, no additional costs had to be incurred to record and transcribe the interviews.

A few other drawbacks highlighted by these scholars include the fact that interviewees may not be able to express themselves eloquently; the data obtained through interviews may be misleading as the participants may not be honest with their answers, because they want to provide answers that they want the researcher to hear; and finally, interviewer bias might slip in as the voice of the interviewer rather than the interviewee might come out stronger in the research report because the researcher might sieve or sift the information provided by the participants. Hence, it is important that the researcher adopts a “noninterfering or receptive style” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 1011) and remains neutral to base the research report on credible and reliable data. The risk of interviewer bias posed by a possible filtering of interviewee responses was eliminated by the fact that the researcher picked up a constancy in the responses to certain questions provided by different participants (Salazar, 1990). For instance, some participants from the universities and the EQA bodies frequently provided similar responses to specific questions. Hence, even if the researcher would want to filter some of the responses, it would be difficult because of the trend of similar responses to certain questions from two different sample groups, i.e. the academics from the higher education institutions and the QA and Accreditation officers from the EQA bodies. In addition, the researcher ensured that the computer’s camera was switched off for the duration of the interviews to avoid agreement with or disagreement on responses through the researcher’s facial expressions, or nonverbal or unspoken gestures (Salazar, 1990). There are mainly three types of interviews used in qualitative research.

Types of Interviews in Qualitative Research

Structured Interviews. This type of interview is believed to be like a questionnaire, to some extent, that is administered orally, consisting of several pre-determined questions developed in advance in a fixed sequence and does not allow probing or subsequent questions to be posed (Annan, 2019; Bhasin, 2019; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Munir, 2017; Zohrabi, 2013). Although these types of interviews are less time-consuming (Annan, 2019), Zohrabi (2013) argued that the inflexibility of structured interviews may provide no room for getting in-depth information from the interviewees and the meaning they make from the world. Hence, structured interviews were not regarded an option for this study, because the researcher wanted the freedom to probe, if so required, to ensure detailed information is collected.

Unstructured Interviews. This type of interview does not usually require set or pre-determined questions, are carried out with not much or no preparation, are time-consuming, and boils down to a regular discussion or dialogue about a particular topic between two individuals (Annan, 2019; Bhasin, 2019). Zohrabi (2013) maintained that since the unstructured interview is not guided by a set list of questions, it is difficult to manage and quite challenging for novice researchers such as students, hence researchers should be vigilant and focused to lead the discussion back to the topic in case interviewees deviate from the research topic (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). As a result, the researcher did not consider unstructured interviews appropriate for this investigation.

Semi-structured Interviews. Among these three types of interviews, the semi-structured interview guide approach is the best favoured by researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Zohrabi, 2013). This was also the preferred method to collect data for this study. Researchers normally prepare in advance for the interviews by setting a list of pre-determined questions to ask the

participants, which can be followed up with probing questions to obtain comprehensive information and clarifications from the interviewees based on their previous answers (Bhasin, 2019; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). This approach helped the researcher to generate rich quality data for this study. In semi-structured interviews, the researcher can direct and keep track of the interviews, because the discussions are flexible and open-ended, though organised (Annan, 2019; Brink, 2018; Zohrabi, 2013). In addition, interviews can be recorded with the permission of the interviewees (Bhasin, 2019).

Bearing in mind the nature of the research topic, in-depth semi-structured interviews, using open-ended questions, were conducted on a one-on-one basis to encourage the participants to talk, using their own words to express their thoughts, lived experiences, and perceptions on the effects the perceived overlapping programme accreditation functions have on higher education institutions. Moreover, semi-structured interviews were chosen over structured interviews because structured interviews have a constraint in that they are not flexible (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), which means “new questions cannot be asked impromptu ... as an interview schedule must be followed” (McLeod, 2014, para 13) and stick to for the duration of the interview (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Doody & Noonan, 2013).

Document analysis was also regarded appropriate for this study, as it is commonly used in conjunction with other qualitative research methods, especially for the purpose of triangulation that enhances the reliability of a study (Bowen, 2009; Dalglish, Khalid & McMahon, 2020).

Document Analysis

Document analysis is a qualitative research method used by researchers to understand the contents of documents relevant to the topic under investigation (Bowen, 2009; Cardno, 2018; Triad3, 2016). Sometimes researchers ponder on the number of documents to consult. Bowen

(2009) advised and simultaneously cautioned that the value and the quality rather than the amount or quantity of documents and written records should be the determining factors. De Andrade, Schmitt, Storck, Piccoli and Ruoff (2018) described document analysis as a process that requires one to carefully identify, select, verify, and reflect on those documents and related sources of information that are connected to the research problem or area of research. This is the approach the researcher used to search for and locate documents for this study. In addition, the researcher followed the steps recommended by Bowen (as cited in Dalglish et al., 2020) generally used in social inquiries, which are to scan or flick-through documents related to the research problem to get a general idea of the contents, followed by perusing the documents more carefully to make pertinent connections with the research problem and decide which sections or paragraphs are worth analysing, and lastly, making meaning of and analysing the chosen texts.

Policy documents, including legislative rules and regulations, are often used in investigations that focus on problems related to education with the aim to unpack and understand complicated issues, including the inherent features of education policies and related documents (Cardno, 2018). Hence, the researcher thought it was essential to study the laws, systems, and practices of the NCHE, NQA, HPCNA, and ECN to determine the extent to which their functions overlap. The researcher selectively picked and studied data sources relevant to the research problem, such as the legislative Acts (i.e. Higher Education Act 26 of 2003, Namibia Qualifications Authority Act 29 of 1996, Allied Health Professions Act 7 of 2004, and Engineering Profession Amendment Act 25 of 1991); QA systems and processes; consultancy, annual and conference reports of the NQA, NCHE, HPCNA, and ECN, which contained rich information about the perceived overlapping programme accreditation functions of these bodies. These sources

of information are classified as public records (O’Leary, 2017) and most of them were retrieved from the respective EQA bodies’ websites, while the rest were accessed on the internet.

Furthermore, the researcher had an opportunity to engage with multiple sources of data, i.e. academics, QA and Accreditation officers, and documents to study the perceived overlapping programme accreditation functions and their effects on Namibia’s higher education institutions comprehensively and with an open mind (Bowen, 2009). Like any other data collection method, document analysis also has advantages and disadvantages.

Advantages of Document Analysis. This method of data collection is cost-effective, and the information gathered from the documents complemented and added more value to the data obtained through the one-on-one interviews (Bowen, 2009; Cardno, 2018; O’Leary, 2017; Triad3, 2016). There were considerable overlaps between the data obtained from the documents and the participants’ responses, which heightened the credibility of the data (Azungah, 2018). According to Azungah (2018), documents are viewed as vital steady and inconspicuous sources of information for qualitative research, as they were developed free of researchers’ influence. Conducting document analysis does not take up too much time. Many documents are available in the public domain; hence researchers do not have to obtain special consent to access them, and they can be used repeatedly or multiple times (Bowen, 2009; Cardno, 2018). Through studying documents, researchers can gather data about historical events and information that people can no longer remember (Bowen, 2009). In addition, it is convenient and saves researchers the stress of seeking permission to access research sites, obtain informed consent, gain the trust of research participants, and to engage physically with participants (Cardno, 2018; O’Leary, 2017).

Disadvantages of Document Analysis. Some of the concerns raised in the use of document analysis are that it requires a researcher to have special research and analytical skills

because documents are not produced specifically for the purpose of research and do not contain special research agendas; sometimes the information in documents are not up-to-date; some documents may not be available to the public without obtaining permission from the particular organisation or they cannot be downloaded free of charge (Bowen, 2009; Cardno, 2018; Triad3, 2016). In the current study, the researcher could access all identified documents with ease via the websites of the EQA bodies and the internet. In some cases, the credibility of data obtained through document reviews may be questioned or doubted especially if the sources are not current (Cardno, 2018). Furthermore, it is argued that state records may have been produced with some form of subjective tone of the authors that the researcher may not detect when analysing the documents (Cardno, 2018; O’Leary, 2017). In the current study, possible subjectivity in the documents studied, was eliminated using multiple data sources (e.g., academics, QA and Accreditation officers and documents) for the purpose of triangulation that strengthened the trustworthiness of the data.

However, data triangulation could have some challenges for qualitative researchers, i.e. it requires sufficient time, the right skills and experience, especially for novice researchers; and it puts growing stress on investigators to cope with more than one data collection method and source (Dawadi, Shrestha & Giri, 2021).

In the following section, the design and development of the research instruments are discussed.

Design and Development of Interview Guides

Leedy and Ormrod (2019) stated that it is easier for novice or student researchers to design an interview guide with sub-questions that speak to the main research questions and research problem. The researcher designed two interview guides, one for the participants from the selected

higher education institutions and another one for the participants from the selected EQA bodies, though almost similar questions were posed in both cases. Both interview guides were based on the three main research questions, i.e. (1) what functions are the NCHE, NQA, HPCNA, and ECN mandated to undertake as per their respective legislations; (2) what are the perceptions and views of the higher education institutions and the EQA bodies as regards the seemingly overlapping functions; and (3) how do the overlapping functions of NCHE, NQA, HPCNA, and ECN affect Namibia's higher education institutions?

The interview guides were divided into three sections. Section A dealt with demographic information of the participants (i.e. gender, age, job title, and name of faculty or department). Section B focused on general information (i.e. experience in programme accreditation). Section C was divided into three categories, respectively titled functions of EQA bodies, views about the seemingly overlapping functions, and effects of EQA on higher education institutions. Each of the three categories was further sub-divided into sub-questions. Open-ended questions were used and designed in such a way that they sufficiently depict the rationale for the study (Cohen et al., 2018), as it was important to show clearly what the researcher attempted to find out about the perceived overlapping functions of Namibia's EQA bodies and their effect on higher education institutions.

Origin of the Research Instrument. The research questions emanated from literature reviewed in some of the sources studied, e.g., a study conducted by Friedman et al. (2017) that aimed to obtain a clearer understanding of both the scope and scale of professional and regulatory body accreditation across Ireland; an investigation conducted to analyse the differences between the accreditation/approval processes employed by professional and regulatory bodies in Ireland (McCurry, 2018); and a study carried out by PhillipsKPA (2017) that explored the impact of professional accreditation on Australian higher education and opportunities that may exist to

reduce regulatory burden for higher education institutions. In reviewing these studies, the researcher identified some questions and themes that related to the current topic investigated.

Due care and diligence were taken to determine whether the identified questions and themes, reformulated into research questions, would be suitable to investigate the effect of the perceived overlapping functions of Namibia's EQA bodies on higher education institutions. As noted by Scheffelaar, Hendriks, Bos, Luijkx and van Dulmen (2018), the questions were amended to suit the purpose of the current investigation, which was to explore the views of the higher education institutions, the EQAAs, and professional bodies concerning the mandates of the NQA, NCHE, HPCNA, and ECN; to explore the perceptions and views of the higher education institutions and the EQA bodies regarding the seemingly overlapping programme accreditation functions; and to establish the likely effects of these overlapping functions on the country's higher education institutions.

A fundamental element of the research instrument is that it should be valid and reliable, hence the researcher should ensure that it is apposite to provide the results that are anticipated (Annan, 2019; Leung, 2015; Munir, 2017).

Validity and Reliability of Research Instruments

Middleton (2019) stated that accuracy denotes validity and consistency denotes reliability.

Validity of the Research Tools. Validity demonstrates the truthfulness or accurateness of a data collection tool, in other words, it shows the extent to which the research instrument measures what it is designed for and believed to measure (Cohen et al., 2018). Among others, researchers can use content and face validity to establish trustworthiness of their research instruments (Hufford, 2021). To ensure content validity, i.e. that the interview guides covered the research objectives and that the questions were valid and appropriate to investigate the perceived

overlapping functions of Namibia's EQA bodies and their effect on higher education institutions, the data collection tools were shared, as standard procedure, with the research supervisor and the UREC for approval. This exercise ensured that the data collection tools were adequate and that the correct questions were asked, which improved the validity of the research instruments used in this study. To establish face validity, i.e. that the questions were relevant to participants in the investigation (Annan, 2019), the interview questions were pre-tested to ensure they yield the anticipated results.

Reliability of the Research Tools. Steadiness and consistency of research results is an indication that the data collection tool is reliable (Mohamad, Sulaiman, Sern & Salleh, 2015). This means that participants' responses should be the same when the data collection tool is administered recurrently at different intervals. An indication of the reliability, strength, and stability of the questions was observed when the interviews were transcribed, because the researcher noticed a consistency between the responses given by the academic staff and the QA and Accreditation officers. Almost similar questions were posed to the two sample groups, especially with regards to the functions and programme accreditation processes of the EQA bodies and the participants' views about the seemingly overlapping functions. However, to increase the trustworthiness of the questions posed during the interviews, the researcher used probing questions to follow up and confirm the responses of the participants. This approach was used to test the truthfulness of the participants' responses, which contributed to the credibility of the study.

Pilot Testing of the Research Tools

To ensure that the research instruments satisfied the principles of validity and reliability, the interview questions were tested before the interviews were conducted. Van Teijlingen and Hundley (2002), echoed by Annan (2019), claimed that piloting the research tool assists

researchers to detect any weakness or ambiguity in the questions prior to conducting the main study. This is a good practice, especially for student researchers, because it accords them an opportunity to test the appropriateness of the research tool, and amend and strengthen the research questions, if so required (Junyong, 2017).

Brooks, Reed, and Savage (2016) emphasised the importance for researchers to share their experiences and lessons learnt through pilot studies. Based on the purposeful sampling technique, the researcher identified two head of departments and two programme coordinators with vast experience in programme accreditation at NUST, and one QA and Accreditation officer involved in the accreditation of higher education programmes at the NCHE. Email invitations, detailing the background and purpose of the study, were sent to the identified individuals. Three individuals accepted the invitation, two at NUST and the one at the NCHE. However, one of the pilot invitees reverted after a very long time to indicate his willingness to participate in the pilot, but as this was even after the interviews for the main study were conducted, the researcher had to gently decline the offer.

The pilot interviews were conducted between 10 and 14 February 2022, using the MS Teams and Zoom platforms. By conducting the pilot interviews, the researcher was able to: (1) identify and duly amend flaws in certain questions; (2) effectively re-arrange the open-ended questions in different categories; (3) assess the appropriateness of the data for the research questions; and (4) test the reliability of the two virtual platforms (MS Teams and Zoom) used in collecting data for the study.

Additionally, the pilot interviews helped the researcher to establish how much time it took to complete the interviews. The duration of the interviews ranged from 30 to 50 minutes. Thus, the initial 45 minutes allocated to the interviews were retained. It also helped the researcher to

familiarise herself with the features of, especially Zoom, to ensure that the interviews in the actual data collection phase went smoothly. For instance, at the end of the first pilot interview, the researcher clicked the pause recording button instead of the stop recording button and consequently lost the data of that pilot interview. However, this was a valuable lesson for the researcher that ensured that careful attention was paid to the recordings of the actual interviews for the study in order not to repeat the same mistake.

Furthermore, the researcher took notes in instances where the participants hesitated or paused in their responses to certain questions, as this was an indication that these questions might be ambiguous or not understood well by the participants (Center for Evaluation and Research, 2011). For instance, all three participants sought clarity on the same question, which was duly corrected. The researcher transcribed the pilot interviews, which provided some kind of surety that the questions do not contain any form of ambiguity, are comprehensible, and provided the expected responses (Bhasin, 2019). Finally, having gone through the pilot interviews, the researcher realised the value of pre-testing research instruments, especially for student or novice researchers (Brooks et al., 2016).

However, despite the benefits that could be reaped from pilot studies, Van Teijlingen and Hundley (2002) cautioned against incorporating data collected during pre-tests in the main findings; and involving participants, who took part in the pre-test, again in the ultimate study to collect new information from them. The researcher strictly avoided this malpractice in this study to safeguard the validity and reliability of the research findings.

Refinement of the Research Instruments

After the pilot interviews were conducted, the researcher tweaked the introductory part of the interview schedules for a better flow. Additionally, one of the participants in the pilot study

pointed out that question one in section C, category one, was a double-barrelled question. The initial question read: How do you understand the functions of the NQA, NCHE, HPCNA, and ECN? All three participants in the pilot interviews sought clarity on this question. They wanted to know whether they should choose one of the EQA bodies or whether they should give the functions of all four bodies. Double-barrelled questions may confuse the participants (Annan, 2019) and subsequently decrease the reliability of the collected data (Mersdorf, 2019). Consequently, this question was rephrased as follows: How do you understand the functions of the (a) Namibia Qualifications Authority; (b) National Council for Higher Education; (c) Health Professions Council of Namibia, and (d) Engineering Council of Namibia? When the actual interviews for the study were conducted, the participants did not seem to have a problem understanding the question and provided the expected responses, hence it contributed to the consistency of the answers for this question.

In addition, the first question in both interview schedules was a multiple-choice question, asking the participants to choose their age range from four options. The UREC raised a concern about this question, as it might have required for more detailed statistical analysis. The researcher was advised to rather ask the participants for their actual age, and the question was revised accordingly. However, pressured by time constraints and the availability of the participants, the researcher started conducting interviews with some of the participants before final approval of the research instruments by the UREC, meaning that the multiple-choice question was posed in the earlier interviews. During the data analysis stage, the researcher realised that the participants' age did not matter in the current study, because it did not have any effect on the research process neither the data gathered from the individual interviews (Formplus Blog, 2021; Frederick, 2021).

Thus, the participants' age was not included in the report. In the subsequent section, the study procedures and ethical assurances are discussed.

Study Procedures and Ethical Assurances

Upon approval by NUST, IUM, NQA, NCHE, and HPCNA to conduct the study at their respective institutions, the pilot study was carried out. Consent to conduct the study was also sought and granted by the UREC. The initial investigation was conducted between 01 March and 23 April 2022 (first round of interviews), and between 17 and 22 June 2022 (second round of interviews). It involved deputy deans for teaching and learning, head of departments and programme coordinators at the Faculty of Computing and Informatics; Faculty of Health, Applied Sciences and Natural Resources; Faculty of Commerce, Human Sciences and Education; and Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment at NUST. Furthermore, involved in the study was a head of department from the Faculty of Information and Communication Technology at IUM. Lastly, also participating in the study were accreditation, audit, and assessment officers at the NQA; QA officers at the NCHE; and accreditation officers at the HPCNA. The researcher clustered the different positions of the participants in the EQA bodies under a common name, i.e. QA and Accreditation officers, which was in line with the types of functions carried out by each participant at their respective duty stations.

At the beginning of the interviews, the researcher sought each participant's permission to record the interview. Since it is vital to enlighten participants on issues of confidentiality and anonymity, the researcher assured the interviewees that their information will be kept safe and confidential to win their trust and encourage them to be spontaneous and frank (Doody & Noonan, 2013; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). As a result, records of the recorded interviews and transcripts were stored on the researcher's office and personal computers that are password protected.

In qualitative research, codes and/or pseudonyms or fictitious names are ordinarily used to conceal the real identities of participants. According to Heaton the use of pseudonyms aids in “... the data to be de-identified without being de-personalized as well” (2022, p. 127). This technique allows researchers to mirror the depth of participants’ real-life experiences and to provide a thick description of their views and perceptions (ibid.). In addition, pseudonyms help to make participants feel like actual human beings, and it also helps the researcher to report their narratives effectively (Burnett, 2013). On the other hand, the use of codes is argued to decrease the human factor, “...reducing [participants] to a set of impersonal index figures and a configuration of codes” (Heaton, 2022, p. 128). In some instances, codes can become complicated and a struggle to read (ibid.). Hence, the researcher has chosen to use names as identifiers to retain the human element.

Using pseudonyms, the researcher tried to ensure participant anonymity. Thus, fictitious names were used from the transcription of the interviews through to the reporting and discussion of the research findings. This was done as a way of making the participants non-recognisable (Gerrard, 2021). It was only in one instance that the research location was concealed by using the code ‘UVW’ (Gerrard, 2021; Saunders, Kitinger & Kitinger, 2015).

Ethical Assurances

Ethical assurance is an integral part of research; therefore, it is important that researchers should take account of the ethical issues associated with research, especially if the investigation involves humans. Halej (2017) accentuated the fact that the necessary attention should be given to research ethics from the outset of planning the study and for the duration of its lifespan, especially where it concerns primary research methods such as interviews. Consequently, provisional consent to conduct the study was obtained from the UREC upon approval of the research proposal in stage one of the research process. In stage three of the research process, another application was

submitted to the UREC for final ethical clearance and approval of the study. This was done in compliance with the principles of research ethics and to guarantee that the researcher will protect the rights, safety, and dignity of the research participants for so long as it is necessary.

Seeking for Consent to Access the Research Site

Ethical gatekeeping and obtaining the necessary consent to access the research site is a key requirement in adherence to the principles and guidelines of research ethics (Knotek, Foley-Nicpon, Kozbelt, Olszewski-Kubilius, Portenga, Subotnik & Worrell, 2020; McFadyen & Rankin, 2016; Shanks & Paulson, 2022). Gatekeepers play a fundamental role in research; therefore, investigators need to accord them the required respect, and provide full details of the study to win their trust, persuade them about the credibility and need for the study and that the researcher is capable to conduct the study (McFadyen & Rankin, 2016). With reference to the latter, one of the institutions demanded that the researcher attached the approved research proposal to the gatekeeper letter, presumably to show that the study was trustworthy and the researcher proficient to conduct the investigation.

The researcher wrote gatekeeper letters to the Office of the Registrar at NUST and the Research and Publications Committee at IUM to obtain consent, not only to access the premises of the respective universities, but also for these institutions to verify whether the necessary ethics protocols were followed to protect their staff who were involved in the study (Siegle, 2019). As such, the provisional ethical clearance from the UREC was also provided, as the application for final ethical clearance was still in the process of approval. Similarly, gatekeeper letters were sent to the NQA, NCHE, and HPCNA to seek permission to gain access to these premises. Although there was no need for the researcher to access these sites physically, as all the interviews were conducted virtually, it was essential to fulfil this ethical requirement as standard practice and in

case the interviews were to be conducted face-to-face. In fact, some of the participants did not mind having a physical interview, but in adherence to the standing COVID-19 protocols of social distancing at the time when the study was conducted, virtual platforms such as MS Teams and Zoom were used.

Adhering to the Principles of Non-maleficence and Benevolence

Non-maleficence in research ethics means to cause no harm and beneficence means to act morally right towards human subjects (Liddell, 2021). According to Singh and Ivory (2015), these principles stem from the medical field and involve the researcher's obligation to ensure the participants' privacy, dignity, autonomy, and safety; minimising the risk of possible harm to research participants and following the 'do no harm' rule at all times (Dooley, Moore & Vallejo, 2017; Shanks & Paulson, 2022). The onus is on the investigator to always take the participants' best interest at heart, hence duly care was taken to exercise the necessary respect towards and to act in the best interest of the participants throughout the duration of the researcher's engagement with the interviewees.

Obtaining Informed Consent from Participants

Wagle (2020) described informed consent as an individual's willing, conscious, and rational action to grant permission to be involved in an investigation. In other words, the participant is cognisant of and fully grasp the likely threats and complications that could be brought about by conducting or being involved in the study (Liddell, 2021). Therefore, it is critically important that participants are informed and made aware of any possible risks or harm in advance of the investigation, and that they must give their informed consent to be part of the research.

It is the researcher's responsibility to provide full details of the study to the participants, as they cannot be expected to grant permission to be involved in something they do not fully

understand, nor should the researcher request their permission if they show any signs that they do not understand the rationale for the study (Dooly et al., 2017; Liddell, 2021). Mindful of this requirement, the researcher provided full details of the study (background and objectives of the inquiry, method of data collection, duration of the interview, etc.) in the email invitation to the participants and obtained informed consent in advance from them. The UREC provisionally approved ethical clearance form was also provided to the participants. In addition, to give their consent, the participants had to sign the informed consent form of Unicaf University in Zambia prior to the interview. Though, due to busy schedules, some of the participants only sent the signed forms after the interviews took place.

Protecting Anonymity and Confidentiality of Participants

Each research participant is entitled to the right to privacy and investigators should take special care to always adhere to this ethical principle. Guaranteeing the confidentiality of the research participants, the data generated through engagements with participants, and the review of institutional policies or legal documents, is of utmost essence (Dooly et al., 2017). In this regard, assurance was given to the interviewees that their responses will be kept confidential and not shared with anyone else. In terms of protecting the anonymity of the research participants, fake names or pseudonyms were allocated to them in an effort not to reveal their true identities. Special care was also taken in collecting and handling the data to ensure responses cannot be traced back to specific participants.

Providing the Right to Withdraw from the Study

It is the participant's right to withdraw from the study at any moment in time and this right should be made clear from the beginning of the researcher's engagement with the participant. The informed consent form of UNICAF University in Zambia includes a clause on the participants'

right to withdraw from the study at any point in time. This form was sent to each participant prior to the interview for familiarisation with this right. It is the researcher's obligation to respect the right of withdrawal. For example, four of the participants withdrew from the study. The first person felt that he was too closely involved with the institution whose functions were studied; the second person felt that the informed consent form of UNICAF University in Zambia did not adequately address the principles of benevolence and non-maleficence; the third individual called the researcher and explained that she felt she might have limited knowledge about the topic investigated because she recently joined the institution; and the fourth individual also felt that she might not have sufficient knowledge and experience about the subject, and this actually happened after she already logged onto the Zoom platform for the interview.

The researcher appreciated each one's honesty and respected their exit from the study. No attempt was made in any way to push them to reconsider withdrawal from the study, as the researcher felt by doing the latter, it could have influenced the quality of the data and findings negatively.

Avoiding Misleading Research Practices

It is expected of any researcher to be always prudent and honest with all the stakeholders in the study. Hence, researchers should guard against conveying false, distorted, or fake information that may discredit the study and even the researchers themselves or engage in malicious practices that can cause harm to the participants (Wagle, 2020). Bassey and Owan (2019) cautioned against tampering with data to achieve the desired results; publishing data that were not obtained during the investigation; and selecting and reporting only data that support one's interest. To address this issue, a copy of the final research report will be shared with the management of the NQA, NCHE, HPCNA, NUST, and IUM as well as the participants of this study.

The Role of the Researcher in the Study

The role of the researcher in the study is equally important and quite challenging for student or novice researchers, especially when conducting qualitative research. As qualitative investigations are of such a nature that researchers cannot detach themselves completely from the study, it is imperative that they honestly look at their own role and objectivity in the research process and outcome (Galdas, 2017; Schoch, 2020). Thus, possible researcher bias might have slipped in during the selection of the participants and research context for this study, and the design of the interview questions and methods to collect and analyse the data. However, Galdas (2017) argued that it should not concern qualitative researchers too much to try and demonstrate or convince others about their impartial or bias-free stance in the study conducted, but to instead show how much value can be added to decision-making processes based on the generation of data directly from information-rich people who have first-hand experience about the phenomenon explored.

Nonetheless, it is important for researchers who engage in qualitative studies to maintain a certain level of objectivity, while trying to solicit responses from participants and simultaneously attempting to bond with them (Schoch, 2020). In addition, researchers should portray the necessary knowledge, skills, and understanding of the topic under investigation, as it may help to direct participants back to the topic in case they deviate from the question and their responses during interviews (Annan, 2019). Hence, the researcher was mindful of giving the interviewees an indication that responses are favoured through facial expressions, for instance. In addition, all interviews were conducted without switching on the computer's camera and the researcher always tried to set aside her own ideas, opinions, and feelings about the perceived overlapping programme

accreditation functions of the EQA bodies. She also avoided posing double-barrelled questions (Annan, 2019; Schoch, 2020).

The next section provides a description of the types of data collected as well as the processes followed, and steps taken to obtain the data. It also explains how the data were coded and analysed as well as the measures taken to triangulate the data.

Data Collection and Analysis

Primary and secondary data concerning the overlapping functions of Namibia's EQA bodies and their effect on higher education institutions were collected for this study. There are various qualitative data analysis software packages that researchers can use, and many of them are available free of charge, e.g., Taguette, RQDA, etc. Other types of qualitative data analysis software must be paid for, e.g., NVivo. The researcher initially planned to analyse the data of this study using NVivo, but unfortunately this software is too costly. Hence, the researcher resorted to analysing the data manually.

Collection of the Data

The primary data were gathered through semi-structured individual interviews, using open-ended questions. To conduct the interviews, the researcher followed the necessary interview protocols (Castillo-Montoya, 2016; Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). Firstly, the researcher had to go through the gatekeepers at the various institutions (NUST, IUM, NQA, NCHE, and HPCNA) to gain permission for their involvement in the study. Once permission was granted to enter the respective research sites, the interview tools were piloted to test the appropriateness of the questions to gather in-depth data about the perceived overlapping functions of Namibia's EQA bodies and their effect on higher education institutions. Leedy and Ormrod (2019) stated that it is imperative to establish and nurture good relations with participants, hence researchers must be

honest and frank about the study and the reasons for their involvement. Individuals who met the sample criteria were identified, and contacted via emails that explained the rationale and objectives of the study. The gatekeeper letters, the institutions' consent letters as well as the informed consent form were attached to all the emails sent to the participants. In cases where there was no response from the identified individuals, the researcher followed up the request with a telephone call.

On the request of some of the participants, the researcher proposed dates and times for the interviews. However, out of respect for the participants, those individuals who preferred to choose their own dates and times that best suited them, were encouraged to do so (Dooly et al., 2017; Shanks & Paulson, 2022). Electronic MS Teams and Zoom links were then sent to the participants to join the interviews from whichever place most convenient for them, e.g., their own homes or offices.

Furthermore, the participants' permission was sought to record the interviews, and everyone gave their consent. The researcher commenced each interview with a brief background and introduction about the study. The questions focussed on the objectives of the study, i.e. to explore the participants' views and understanding about the mandates of the NQA, NCHE, HPCNA, and ECN; to explore the perceptions and views of the academics and QA and Accreditation officers regarding the seemingly overlapping functions; and to establish what effects the overlaps in the QA functions of the NQA, NCHE, HPCNA, and ECN have on Namibia's higher education institutions. During the interviews, the researcher only posed one question at a time, waited patiently for the interviewees to finish speaking before responses were further probed or followed up for clarity, and regularly thanked the interviewees for their responses (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). This approach helped to put the participants at ease and encouraged them to share their personal knowledge, ideas, views, feelings, and experiences about the perceived overlapping

programme accreditation functions in a non-numerical open-ended orally reported way with the researcher (Elliot & Timulak, 2021).

The interviews were ended by expressing appreciation for the interviewees' willingness to take some time from their busy schedules to participate in the study. The researcher also informed the participants about the possibility to make subsequent contact with them in case there would be a need to double-check or clarify information to confirm that their responses were captured correctly (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012).

After the interviews had been conducted, the researcher transcribed them verbatim by using the MS Word 365 Transcriber, as it was imperative to provide a rich account of the participants' interpretations to support the findings as well as to ensure trustworthiness of the results (Noble & Smith, 2015). Flick (2014) advised that transcripts should be as comprehensive as possible and contain the interview questions. To improve the validity of the data, the participants were given an opportunity to comment on the interview transcripts (member checking) to indicate whether the final text satisfactorily reflected their views, experiences, and feelings about the perceived overlapping functions of the NQA, NCHE, HPCNA, and ECN and their effect on Namibia's higher education institutions. The latter was also deemed essential to ensure that the researcher's prejudices are not captured.

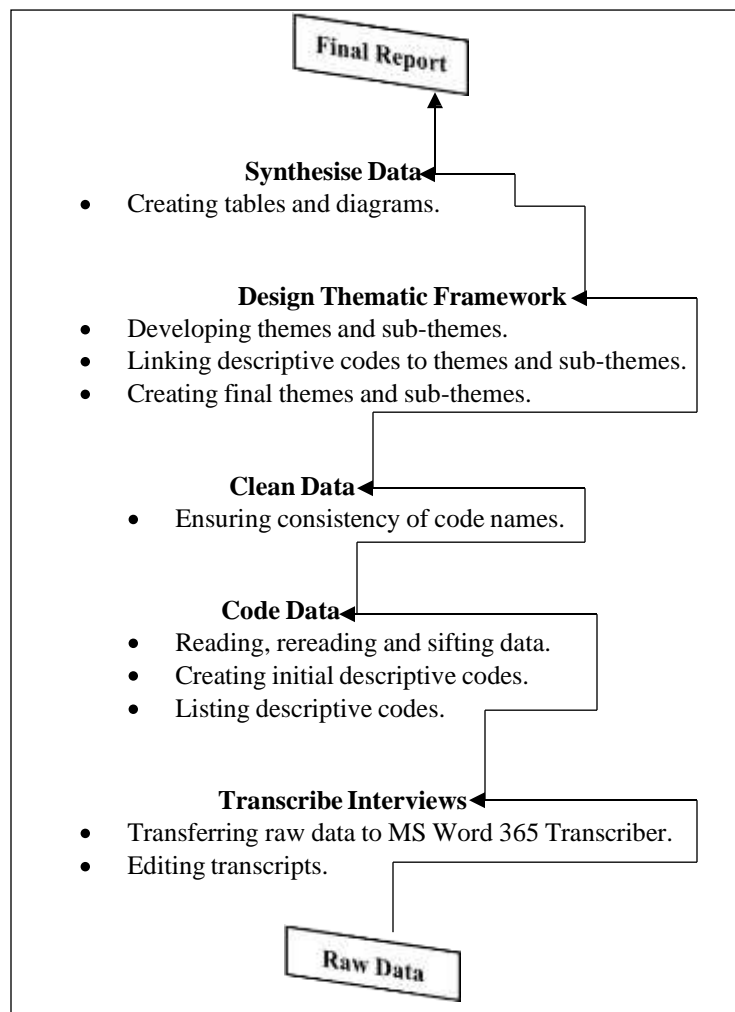
The secondary data were collected through identifying and selecting key documents of the EQA bodies that contained information about their respective functions and that reported details regarding the perceived overlapping functions. These documents included the parliamentary Acts that established these bodies as well as annual, conference, workshop, and consultancy reports. Another key document studied was the strategic plans of some of these bodies (NQA and NCHE). The documents were studied over a period of two months, i.e. September to October 2022. The

researcher read and studied the mentioned documents thoroughly to identify and make notes of content related to the perceived overlapping functions.

Analysis of the Data

The next step in the research process was the analysis of the data. Qualitative data analysis is described as a technique that involves scrutinising and dissecting data to such an extent that it is simplified, elucidated, and easily comprehended (CIRT, 2019). Thus, the data was carefully analysed to make sense of it. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Thematic analysis is a flexible way of attempting to establish participants' knowledge, understanding, experiences, feelings, and viewpoints captured in interview texts to ultimately make meaning of the data (Caulfield, 2019).

The data was analysed as per the CIRT's (2019) steps for data analysis, which are like Kriukow's (2020) thematic analysis in Microsoft Word. Figure 7 depicts the process that the researcher followed to analyse the data, which is a combination of the steps proposed by CIRT and Kriukow.

Figure 7*Steps in the Data Analysis Process*

Note. Adapted from *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*, by Creswell, J. W., 2013, as cited in Leedy, P. D., & Ormrod, J. E., 2019, p. 388.

As shown in Figure 7, the researcher started the data analysis process by transcribing the interviews with the use of the MS Word 365 Transcriber. During this process, the researcher allocated a pseudonym to each interviewee and kept a separate list that indicated which pseudonym was allocated to which interviewee (Cohen et al., 2018). All interview transcripts were thoroughly edited by listening to the recordings to ensure a verbatim version of each was captured. Secondly,

the researcher read the data recurrently, while reflecting on the participants' responses to the research questions and jotting down impressions to get familiar with the views and interpretations of the participants. During this step, the researcher continuously tried to make meaning of the data and simultaneously decide which pieces of data were worth keeping. As advised by Elliot and Timulak (2021), the researcher perused the data line-by-line and made preliminary codes. To make retrieval easier, the data was coded or labelled, and a list of descriptive codes developed in the form of a table.

Thirdly, the data was cleaned by fine-tuning and updating the interview transcripts and the list of codes continuously to ensure the code names were consistent. Fourthly, the researcher identified and catalogued themes to make sense of the data, i.e. key points raised by participants, views and opinions given by participants that were not expected, and differences and commonalities in responses. This allowed the researcher to see the connections between themes, gain general insights into emerging themes and move toward analytical insight. The researcher used different colours and highlighted the descriptive codes, themes, and sub-themes to show how they were linked to each other. A thematic framework, consisting of preliminary themes developed from the descriptive codes, was then generated. To show how many times each descriptive code appeared throughout the interview transcripts and records generated from the document analysis, the researcher indicated in brackets the number next to each descriptive code to demonstrate how strong a certain theme was.

The researcher used the thematic framework to develop sub-themes and sub-sub-themes to which the descriptive codes were linked. Next, patterns were identified, and connections made, and the final themes, sub-themes and sub-sub-themes grouped together in a sensible hierarchy, which helped the researcher to stay organised and focused. Finally, the themes, sub-themes, and

sub-sub-themes were summarised and presented in the form of a table (Table 5) and a concept map (Figure 8) to give potential readers a snapshot of the study. The findings were then presented, the data interpreted, and the results explained. The data generated from the document analysis was analysed in a similar fashion. With the exclusion of step one, the researcher extracted relevant pieces of information from the documents analysed; coded and cleaned the data; developed a thematic framework; and synthesised the data.

Analysing qualitative data manually is believed to be somewhat outdated, requires a lot of time and could be quite arduous (Dudovskiy, 2019b), but having used this method of data analysis increased the researcher's confidence because it allowed for an engagement with the interviewees' responses at a personal and deeper level. In addition, the researcher could repeatedly read and reread the interview transcripts; rework and amend codes, categories, and themes; and clarify or illuminate meaning as new understanding of the data was gained (Noble & Smith, 2014).

The trustworthiness of the findings of qualitative research cannot be overemphasised. Leedy and Ormrod (2019) claimed that qualitative investigators do not normally express things in numbers, but they need to ensure that their research is reliable or trustworthy and authentic (i.e. that the readers believe in the results of the study).

Trustworthiness of the Findings

In qualitative research, the trustworthiness of findings can be ensured through four key or quality criteria, namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Cohen et al., 2018; Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019).

Credibility. Refers to how much value and confidence there is in the research findings. Cohen et al. (2018) referred to credibility as the “truth value” (2018, p. 248). For research findings to be credible, it should convince the public or those for whom the outcomes are meant that they

are a true reflection and analysis of the participants' original opinions and experiences (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The credibility of data can be ensured through the views and perspectives of various groups of research subjects (Azungah, 2018). For instance, in this study, two sampling groups were used, viz. academics involved in programme accreditation at NUST and IUM, and QA and Accreditation officers at respectively the NQA, NCHE, and HPCNA. Data triangulation and member checking are also valuable ways of ensuring the credibility and reliability of research findings (Almeida, Rosero, Chiliza & Castillo, 2021; Azungah, 2018; Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). Triangulation means using different sources and methods of data collection. The latter was achieved in this study by employing both individual interviews and document analysis to gather rich in-depth data about the topic investigated. The data was also obtained through multiple sources, e.g., academic staff at the universities, and QA and Accreditation staff at the EQA bodies. Additionally, member checking of interview transcripts was done to strengthen the quality of the data.

Transferability. Korstjens and Moser (2018) described transferability as the extent to which the outcomes of qualitative research can be transmitted or made applicable to similar situations or research subjects. For example, if the same interview questions were to be posed to different academics at other higher education institutions familiar with the programme accreditation functions and processes of the EQA bodies, there would most probably be a likeliness that similar responses would be given to the same questions. To achieve this, the researcher should ensure a thorough explanation or 'thick description' of the findings (Stumpfegger, 2017). In the current study, the researcher intentionally or purposefully selected participants with vast knowledge and experience in QA, especially programme accreditation, to ensure a thorough description of the topic investigated is provided. These participants also showed the ability to

express their perspectives and views eloquently, openly, and in a meaningful way (Palinkas et al., 2015). Moreover, to further improve the transferability of the study, the researcher described in detail the context in which the investigation was conducted, the research sites, sample frame, sample size, unit of analysis, sampling method, inclusion and exclusion criteria, interview questions and adjustments in the interview questions based on the input from her research supervisor and the UREC, pre-testing of the instrument, interview procedures, and extracts from the interviews (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Dependability. Dependability is in consonance with consistency (Cohen et al., 2018). Dependability of a study can be guaranteed by thoroughly employing data collection and analysis methods most appropriate for the study that are coherently reported (ibid.). The level of dependability of a study will become evident if feedback from research participants and anyone who has a stake in the research, confirm that the findings, interpretation, and recommendations are backed by the original data obtained from the participants (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). In other words, there should be a trace of consistency between the research process and the final report. Therefore, the researcher took special care to describe every step in the research process in detail (from the identification of the research problem and rationale for the study, methodologies applied, sampling methods and size, to the data collection and analysis procedures) and in a comprehensive and sensible way to ensure the study is reliable (Stumpfegger, 2017). The research report will also be shared with the participants and other stakeholders in the higher education sector for evaluation of the effectiveness of the study.

Confirmability. Confirmability refers to the steps taken to ensure that the data and findings are bias-free, and that the researcher took a neutral position for the duration of the study (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Scrutinising qualitative data during data collection and analysis through a

checking and rechecking exercise may contribute to increasing the confirmability of data to ensure the likelihood of findings to be repeated in other studies. Member checking of data and triangulation can improve confirmability of qualitative data. Leedy and Ormrod (2019) and Stumpfegger (2017) are some of the scholars who are in favour of an audit trail that basically means to keep records of data collection and data analysis activities as progress is made in the research process. For this study, the researcher used to make notes of activities she engaged in, e.g., small notes and reminders of which sources and reference works to use for particular chapters in the research process, filing of communication between the researcher and gatekeepers and the researcher and the participants, electronic records of the audio files of interviews, electronic and hard copies of transcripts, and electronic files and notes on how the data were analysed step-by-step.

Summary

In this qualitative case study, the researcher investigated the perceived overlapping functions of Namibia's EQA bodies and their effect on higher education institutions. The chapter was based on five parts.

In the first part, the researcher discussed the research approach and design of the study, where the importance and use of research paradigms in an inquiry were highlighted. Kivunja and Kuyini described a paradigm as thinking in a rational and logical way (2017), and according to Denzin and Lincoln (2018), the concept paradigm denotes acting in a morally acceptable way. Hence, in view of these scholars' interpretation of research paradigms, this study was conducted with the hope to trigger the long awaited and much needed action from the relevant authorities in Namibia to address the overlapping programme accreditation functions of the NQA, NCHE, HPCNA, and ECN. Insights into the four parts of a research paradigm, i.e. ontology, epistemology,

methodology, and axiology/ethics, and how they shaped the researcher's thoughts around the study, were provided. The various types of research paradigms that can be applied in educational research, i.e. positivist, interpretivist, critical and pragmatic paradigms, were explained. Cohen et al. (2018) emphasised the importance of paradigms to be fit for their intended purpose, meaning that scholars should confidently know which research paradigm would most appropriately guide their research to ensure it is structured clearly within a particular framework, as their philosophical position will guide their research design (Al-Saadi, 2014; Keser & Köksal, 2017; Makombe, 2017).

This research was based on the interpretivist research paradigm, because the phenomenon investigated was influenced by the viewpoints, explanations, and experiences of the participants. The selected academics and QA and Accreditation officers from respectively NUST and IUM, and the NQA, NCHE, and HPCNA, which were the research participants in this study, brought in-depth meanings and a rich gist to the investigation, because QA and programme accreditation form an integral part of their day-to-day work operations. Interpretivism was preferred over the positivist research model that hinges on epistemological dualism (Park et al., 2019), because the researcher (knower) and her participants (known) closely interacted with each other and engaged on a personal level through individual interviews via MS Teams and Zoom, which allowed for a personal conversation with all participants. Moreover, interpretive research is consistent with qualitative research (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), and this is the approach that was used for this study.

The second part of the chapter provided a description of the population and the sampling procedures. The population in this study included the academic staff members at Namibia's public and private higher education institutions, who were directly or indirectly involved in programme accreditation and institutional accreditation/audits at their respective institutions. Also included in

the population of this study were the QA staff at the country's EQA bodies, responsible for programme accreditation and institutional accreditation or audits. The sample of this study was drawn from the academic staff members at Namibia's two public universities, i.e. UNAM and NUST, and one private university, namely the International University of Management (IUM). At the three universities, the sampling frame consisted of deputy deans for teaching and learning, and head of departments or programme coordinators, as these are normally the staff members who are directly involved in programme accreditation exercises. Not included in the sampling frame were the deans of the faculties and the deputy deans for research and innovation, as these staff members are not directly involved in programme accreditation. The sampling frame also included QA and Accreditation officers responsible for academic and/or professional programme accreditation at the NQA, NCHE, HPCNA, and ECN. These are staff members who work in the QA sections at these EQA bodies and who are, by virtue of their positions, directly involved in the logistical arrangements and site visits for programme accreditation exercises carried out by the EQA bodies at higher education institutions.

The initial sample size was 46, i.e. 36 male and female academic staff members from the three universities, consisting of six deputy deans for teaching and learning (or the equivalent position) and six head of departments or programme coordinators from the three universities each; and 10 staff from the EQA bodies, comprising three QA officers at NQA and NCHE each, plus two accreditation officers at HPCNA and ECN each. However, due to the non-responsiveness of UNAM and ECN, the sample size was reduced to 32, and included 12 academics from NUST; 12 academics from IUM; 3 accreditation officers from NQA; 3 QA officers from NCHE; and 2 accreditation officers from HPCNA. Out of the 32 invitations extended to the academics at the two remaining higher education institutions and QA staff at the three EQA bodies, 20 participants (13

females and 7 males) accepted the invitation for the individual interviews. Non-probability sampling was used because it is ordinarily associated with qualitative research. Purposive sampling, which is a type of non-probability sampling and regarded a fundamental characteristic of qualitative research (Cohen et al., 2018), was chosen for this study.

In part three, the development and approval of the research instruments as well as the data collection methods used in this study, were explained. Instrumentation of data collection tools is a fundamental element of the data collection process. Salkind (2010) described instrumentation as the tools or methods by which researchers try to measure variables or learn more about something or someone of interest during the data-gathering phase, while Bitonio (2014) defined it as the process of designing research tools that could be used fittingly to collect information on the research topic. Interviews are believed to be the nub of qualitative data collection (Fornaro et al., 2021; Zohrabi, 2013), are regularly applied in education (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), and are generally used with small samples chosen in a purposive way (Annan, 2019). Hence, individual interviews were chosen as a data collection method for this study. Through interviews, valuable information can be collected personally from the research subjects; participants can provide personal information in a comprehensive manner; matters can be discussed in depth; and pre-determined questions can be posed to gather specific information that gives the interviewer a better grip on the kinds of information received (Annan, 2019; Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Zohrabi, 2013). Some of the disadvantages of interviews highlighted by Creswell (2012) and others (Cohen et al., 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018) are that the interviewer may opt to record the interviews that would require acquisition of the relevant equipment (e.g., voice recorder) and software to transcribe the interview, and such equipment can be costly and should be obtained well in advance. In the case of this study, the built-in recording functions of

MS Teams and Zoom were used to record the interviews, and the researcher used the MS Word 365 Transcriber to transcribe all the interviews. Thus, no additional costs had to be incurred to record and transcribe the interviews.

Semi-structured individual interviews were the preferred method to collect data for this study. Researchers normally prepare in advance for the interviews by setting a list of pre-determined questions to ask the participants, which can be followed up with probing questions to obtain comprehensive information and clarifications from the interviewees based on their previous answers (Bhasin, 2019; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). This approach helped the interviewer to generate rich quality data for this study. To ensure content validity, i.e. that the interview guides covered the research objectives and that the questions were valid and appropriate to investigate the perceived overlapping functions of Namibia's EQA bodies and their effect on higher education institutions, the data collection tools were shared with the research supervisor and the UREC for approval. The latter is standard protocol of the university to ensure the quality of research tools.

An indication of the reliability strength and stability of the questions was noticed when the interviews were transcribed, because the researcher noticed a consistency between the responses given by the academic staff at NUST and IUM, and the QA and Accreditation officers at the NQA, NCHE, and HPCNA. Almost similar questions were posed to the two sample groups, especially with regards to the functions and programme accreditation processes of the EQA bodies and the participants' views about the seemingly overlapping functions. To ensure that the research instruments satisfied the principles of validity and reliability, the interview questions were tested before the interviews were conducted.

Part four dealt with the study procedures and ethical assurance. Due diligence was given to adhered to all ethical protocols and guidelines in research, e.g., gaining access to the research

sites; adhering to the principles of benevolence and non-maleficence; obtaining informed consent from participants; protecting the anonymity and confidentiality of participants; providing the right to withdraw from the study; and avoiding misleading research practices. The role of the researcher in the study was also discussed.

Finally, part five discussed the data collection procedures and data analysis methods. Primary and secondary data were collected for this study concerning the perceived overlapping functions of Namibia's EQA bodies and their effect on higher education institutions. The researcher contemplated analysing the data of this study using the computer Software NVivo, but due to cost implications, the data was analysed manually as per the CIRT's (2019) steps for data analysis and Kriukow's (2020) thematic analysis in Microsoft Word. Similar procedures were followed to analyse the data generated through the individual semi-structured interviews and the data obtained through the document analysis.

This part also discussed the trustworthiness of the data and the findings. The trustworthiness of the data in this study was ensured using multiple data sources, viz. academics involved in programme accreditation at NUST and IUM, and QA and Accreditation officers at respectively the NQA, NCHE, and HPCNA. Triangulation was achieved by employing both individual interviews and document analysis to gather rich in-depth data concerning the topic investigated. Additionally, member checking of interview transcripts was done to strengthen the quality of the data. Transferability was achieved by intentionally or purposefully selecting participants with vast knowledge and experience in external programme accreditation to ensure a thorough description of the topic investigated is provided. The participants also showed the ability to express their perspectives and views eloquently, openly, and in a meaningful way (Palinkas et al., 2015). Dependability was guaranteed by taking special care to describe every step in the

research process (from the identification of the research problem and rationale for the study, methodologies applied, sampling methods and size, to the data collection and analysis procedures) in a comprehensive and sensible way to ensure the reliability of the study (Stumpfegger, 2017). Finally, member checking of the data and triangulation were used to improve confirmability of the findings.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Striving to strengthen the overall quality of higher education in the country, the Namibian government has established multiple EQA regulatory bodies. Among these bodies are the NQA and NCHE that are operating as EQAAs, and the ECN and HPCNA that are operating as professional bodies. The bottom line is that all these bodies are involved in EQA activities to assure the quality of the Namibian higher education system. These activities vary from the accreditation of programmes, validation of professional programmes, and the auditing or accreditation of institutions. Since all these EQA bodies are involved in programme accreditation or validation, there is a perception that their functions, systems, and processes overlap, causing a duplication of efforts. Hence, the purpose of this study was to explore the perceived overlapping functions of Namibia's EQA bodies and their effect on higher education institutions.

This qualitative case study aimed, firstly, to explore the views of the higher education institutions, the EQAAs, and professional bodies concerning the mandates of the NQA, NCHE, HPCNA, and ECN. Secondly, this investigation explored the perceptions and views of the higher education institutions, the EQAAs, and professional bodies as regards the seemingly overlapping functions; and thirdly, the researcher wanted to establish what effects these overlaps have on Namibia's higher education institutions.

In addition, the perception about the overlapping functions stimulated the researcher to propose a plan of action that might assist the EQA bodies and government authorities to streamline the programme accreditation processes. It is hoped that the proposed plan of action could serve as a guideline to ultimately simplify and add value to the current programme accreditation processes employed in Namibian higher education institutions. The literature reviewed, data generated

through semi-structured individual interviews, data analysis as well as the documents analysed informed the design of the proposed plan of action.

This chapter is divided into three main sections. Section one provides an overview of the trustworthiness of the data obtained through the semi-structured individual interviews and documents studied, which was safeguarded through the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The findings of the study are presented in section two, which includes at its introductory part, a brief synopsis of the study. This section gives insight into the results of the study organised in a logical fashion without any explanations of how they relate to the literature reviewed. The findings are based on the following three main research questions:

Q1. What functions are the NCHE, NQA, HPCNA, and ECN mandated to undertake as per their respective legislations?

Q2. What are the perceptions and views of the higher education institutions, the QAAs, and professional bodies as regards the seemingly overlapping functions?

Q3. How do the overlapping functions of NCHE, NQA, HPCNA, and ECN affect Namibia's higher education institutions?

The main research questions, together with some probing questions posed during the interviews, are restated in the section where the findings are presented. Section three provides an evaluation and discussion of the findings. Finally, the chapter is concluded with a summary of the main points discussed in the different sections. Trustworthiness of the data is a key element of the study and is discussed in the following section.

Trustworthiness of Data

It is vital for the researcher to prove the trustworthiness of the investigation (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). Trustworthiness of qualitative research could be accomplished by carefully

adhering to four key quality requirements, which are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Cohen et al., 2018; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). Hence, the researcher always tried to pay heed to these criteria to ensure confidence in the processes used to collect, analyse, and interpret the data.

Credibility

Qualitative data analysis might be jeopardised by the researcher's pre-conceived ideas, beliefs, experiences, or subjectivity (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019); therefore, to improve the credibility of the findings, the researcher adopted the following strategies:

- Semi-structured individual interviews that were the main method of data collection were complemented by analysing key official documents of the four EQA bodies that the researcher found relevant to the study. Among the documents analysed were the regulatory frameworks of the EQA bodies, which guaranteed the stability of the data gathered through this means and hence contributed to the credibility of the findings (Morgan, 2022). These multiple data collection methods provided the opportunity to triangulate the various data sets to ensure authenticity of the research findings (Almeida et al., 2021; Azungah, 2018; Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). Through triangulation, the researcher ensured that chances for researcher subjectivity or likely biases were reduced (Morgan, 2022). In addition, the inclusion of two sampling groups in the study (academics involved in programme accreditation at the universities, and QA and Accreditation officers at the EQA bodies) rendered an opportunity to obtain different views and experiences from 'many voices' or from a 'multivocality' perspective, a term often used in case study research (Cohen et al., 2018). The latter further reinforced the quality and credibility of the data and research findings.

- Although it is a challenge for novice researchers, such as doctoral students, to ensure that the study had been conducted with the necessary thoroughness (Noble & Smith, 2015), to guarantee that the study was carried out with some element of rigour, member checking was applied whereby the interview transcripts were shared with the participants to confirm that their responses were captured correctly (Chase, 2017). There were a couple of instances where participants corrected certain words not captured correctly by the researcher and where some information was added. Since researchers and participants view the data through different lenses, returning the transcripts to the participants for review, strengthened the credibility of the data (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).
- The participants were granted the opportunity to decline the invitation to participate in the research or to withdraw whenever they felt the need to do so (Cohen et al., 2018). This was done to ensure the researcher operated within the perimeters of research ethical procedures and, most importantly, that the participants wanted to take part in the study out of their own free will because they felt they could make a meaningful contribution to the topic investigated.

Transferability

The fact that the participants were from two different higher education institutions and three different EQA bodies heightened the transferability of the results, as the responses of the participants to certain research questions were similar in many cases. Hence, there was a good probability that academics and QA officers from other higher education institutions and EQA bodies could resonate with the findings of the study if the same interview questions and similar methodologies were to be applied. A thick description of the participants, research methodology and process applied as well as a comprehensive explanation of the results of the study further

improved the transferability of the data. The researcher tried to provide potential readers with an in-depth explanation of information, such as the background of the study, demographic information of the participants, sample size and method, inclusion and exclusion criteria, functions of the EQA bodies and programme accreditation processes, interview questions and processes, piloting of the research instrument, and extracts of participants' responses, to leave the "transferability judgement" (Korstjens & Moser, 2018, p. 122) up to the readers.

Moreover, participants were purposefully selected to benefit from the experiences, interpretations, and perceptions of individuals who are well-informed on the programme accreditation and validation processes of the various EQA bodies, and to collect quality data until such time that data saturation was reached (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Omona, 2013). The researcher felt that data saturation was reached after the 17th interview was conducted, as no new facts, categories, or themes emerged in the data obtained up and until that stage. However, to improve data saturation, three additional interviews were conducted, but these hardly yielded any new facts or themes, which was a sign to the researcher that data saturation was reached.

Dependability

To ensure dependability, the researcher worked in a consistent and transparent way from the beginning of the research process until the end (Cohen et al., 2018; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Hence, the researcher recorded the entire research journey from the identification and statement of the problem and the methodology used to the presentation of the results (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Some of the documents that the researcher stored for future reference and validation purposes are audio recordings and transcripts of the interviews. This was done so that the data can be interpreted in a similar way, and the findings and recommendations confirmed by the participants of the study, stakeholders in higher education as well as other researchers (Anney,

2014). Thus, the research report will be availed not only to the participants, but also the management and staff of the EQA bodies; higher education institutions; and the Ministry of Higher Education, Training and Innovation, among other, for evaluation of effectiveness. Furthermore, the researcher carefully followed the steps for analysing qualitative data manually that the CIRT (2019) and Kriukow (2020) proposed, as it was important to guarantee that the data analysis method is consistent with the qualitative research design that was employed for this study (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Confirmability

To satisfy the principle of confirmability, the researcher tried not to be biased and rather took an impartial stance throughout the research process, as this is a critical factor to be considered and aids in increasing the quality of the results (Almeida et al., 2021; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). However, it is a challenge for qualitative researchers to remain one hundred percent objective when collecting and analysing qualitative data (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). Mindful of the risk to reflect the researcher's own knowledge, experiences, and beliefs about the phenomenon investigated, the researcher tried to base the findings, discussions and conclusions on the raw data, documents analysed, literature reviewed, and the themes, sub-themes and sub-sub-themes that emerged from the data analysed (Cohen et al., 2018). This was done to remove any element of bias or preconceived ideas of the researcher from the results and conclusions, and to improve the chances that other researchers will confirm the findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

To further satisfy the principle of confirmability, a comprehensive record or audit trail was maintained to clearly and transparently show the data collection and analysis processes applied. This was done to ensure that detailed information is available to stakeholders or anyone else who

might be triggered to conduct future research or related investigations on the topic (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019).

Furthermore, the researcher experienced a few challenges in the data collection process. For example, some of the participants requested for the interview questions and out of fear that they (and others) may withdraw if the researcher refused, the interview questions were sent to all the participants in advance. This action could have jeopardised the trustworthiness or genuineness of the responses, but the researcher rejected this possibility, as some of the participants indicated that they did not have time to even open the attachments and some others indicated that they preferred not to preview the questions because they did not want to be tempted to discuss them with colleagues before the interview. The researcher could also sense the authenticity and honesty of the participants in the manner (tone of voice, nuances, or intonation) in which they answered the questions. Besides, the audio recordings and verbatim transcripts of the interviews were safely stored and are readily available to prove that the data is reliable (Chandler, Anstey & Ross, 2015). The next section presents the results of the study.

Results

Before the presentation of the results, a brief overview of the study is provided.

Overview of the Study

This section provides a synopsis of the study as regards the research design, background information about the research sites and the participants, consent from the research sites and the participants, sampling method, pilot study, and data collection and analysis procedures.

Research Design. A qualitative as opposed to a quantitative research approach was applied for this investigation, as the researcher was keen to establish the participants' interpretations, feelings, and perceptions about the perceived overlapping functions of Namibia's

EQA bodies and their effect on higher education institutions, through their lived experiences. In addition, interpretive research goes together with qualitative research, hence the reason why it was the choice of design (Creswell, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018) for the current investigation.

Complaints about qualitative studies not being objective enough often threaten the credibility of research (Essays, UK, 2018b), but since this type of research design is flexible, it allowed the researcher to use multiple data sources to explore the effects of the overlapping programme accreditation functions through the lenses of the different participants to make sense of their responses (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). A case study was adopted for this investigation. The rationale for embracing a case study was to delve deep into the experiences of the participants to collect rich in-depth information and facts about the phenomenon within its context.

Background Information about Research Sites and Participants. The study was carried out at two universities, one public (NUST) and one private university (IUM) located in the capital city of Namibia. NUST is one of two public universities in the country and IUM is the only recognised private university in Namibia. Both institutions are in operation for a long time in the Namibian higher education sector and both are subjected to the programme accreditation processes of national EQA bodies. Including a public and a private institution in the research, was not done with the intention to compare the views of the participants across contexts, because this was not a comparative investigation. This single case study rather investigated and explored the phenomenon or situation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Schoch, 2020; Takahashi & Araujo, 2020) that resulted from similar QA functions having been assigned to different EQA bodies in Namibia, and the programme accreditation and validation conducted at higher education institutions that form an integral part of these QA functions. Hence, the researcher sought to hear a multitude of views by

tapping into the personal experiences of different individuals involved in programme accreditation at their respective institutions, rather than to quantify things or generalise the research outcomes.

Also involved in this investigation were three EQA bodies, namely, NQA, NCHE and HPCNA. All three bodies were established by different Acts of Parliament, which mandated them to conduct QA in Namibia's public and private higher education institutions. The EQA bodies are also situated in the capital city of Namibia.

The participants involved in this study were thirteen academic staff members at the two universities, including seven QA and Accreditation officers at three EQA bodies (see Table 3). These are individuals who have detailed knowledge, understanding, and experience of the QA functions of the EQA bodies. In addition, they are well acquainted with the QA systems and programme accreditation and validation processes of the NQA, NCHE, and HPCNA because of their close involvement in these processes at their respective institutions.

Table 3

List of Participants

University	Position of Staff				Total
	Associate Deans: Teaching and Learning	Head of Departments	Programme Coordinators	QA and Accreditation Officers	
NUST	3	5	4	-	12
IUM	-	1		-	1
EQA bodies					
NQA	-	-	-	3	3
NCHE	-	-	-	2	2
HPCNA	-	-	-	2	2
	3	6	4	7	20

Consent from Research Sites and Participants. Obtaining consent to carry out an investigation is fundamental in any study and the researcher had to honour this principle of

research ethics. To get permission from the universities and EQA bodies to ensure inclusion of these sites in the study, gatekeeper letters, providing detailed information about the research, were sent to the heads of these institutions via email. The template for gatekeeper letters of UNICAF University in Zambia was used for this purpose. Some of the attachments that accompanied the gatekeeper letters were the UREC approved ethical clearance form and the approved research proposal, as requested by one of the universities. The researcher also informed the institutions and the EQA bodies that the data will be collected virtually via platforms such as MS Teams and Zoom in adherence to the standing COVID-19 protocols of social distancing that were in place at the time of the investigation.

After permission was granted by the universities and the EQA bodies to conduct the investigation, the researcher started identifying potential participants who could be approached for their willingness and consent to be involved in the study. An email invitation, describing the background, purpose, and objectives of the inquiry; method of data collection; and duration of the interview, among other, was sent to the potential participants who were known to the researcher. In some instances, the permission letters issued by the institutions already contained names and email addresses of potential participants whom the researcher could approach for inclusion in the study. One permission letter provided the names and contact details of offices that could be approached for a list of names of potential participants. Attached to all the email invitations were the gatekeeper letter sent to the individual institutions and the permission letter issued by the respective institutions. The ethical clearance application approved by the UREC was another document that accompanied the email invitation to the participants. In addition, all the participants signed the informed consent form of UNICAF University in Zambia.

The participants' anonymity and confidentiality of their responses were protected, and pseudonyms were used in the interview transcripts and throughout the data analysis as well as in this report. In addition, the letters 'UVW' were used to conceal expressions or words which could be traced back to the participants. In the case of the participants from the EQA bodies, in this study, they are commonly referred to as QA and Accreditation officers to eliminate the chances for their identities to be revealed through their actual job titles since they were only a few.

Sampling Method. Homogeneous purposive sampling, which is a non-probability sampling method and consonant with qualitative research, was applied in this investigation. Although non-probability sampling does not cater for large numbers of participants to be included in the research and thus does not allow for generalisation of the results (Cohen et al., 2018), the researcher preferred to opt for this sampling method for the following reasons: individuals who are well versed with the QA functions of the EQA bodies could selectively and in a thoughtful way be chosen, as most of them were known to the researcher; it was easy and less time-consuming to identify a small group of information-rich people whom the researcher knew were eligible to be chosen as they met the sampling criteria; and to select the sample in this manner did not have any cost implications for the researcher (Dudovskiy, 2019b; Etikan et al., 2016; Taherdoost, 2016). Furthermore, it was necessary for the researcher to cautiously identify and utilise a sampling method that was most suitable to answer the research questions and that related to the aims and objectives of the inquiry.

Although this choice of sampling method aided the researcher to include only those individuals with in-depth knowledge in programme accreditation, there were a few challenges to identify some of the potential participants at one of the institutions, as the researcher did not know all the staff members. However, with the help of the relevant offices at these institutions that

provided lists of names of academic staff who met the sampling criteria, the researcher could eventually secure interview appointments with the staff who were willing and able to participate in the study.

Pilot Study. Many researchers prefer to pilot or pre-test questionnaires or interview schedules to eliminate or remedy possible flaws in research instruments and evaluate the usefulness of the tool because such testing might contribute to the overall quality and success of the ultimate study (Annan, 2019; Malmqvist, Hellberg, Möllås, Rose & Shevlin, 2019; Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002). For these reasons the researcher felt the need to have a trial run of the draft interview questions with academic staff and QA and Accreditation officers. Special care was taken to follow the same procedures for the pilot interviews as were intended for the main study to increase the internal validity of the interview guides. Hence, the pilot participants were invited via email. The email invitation included the main details of the study, i.e. title, aims and objectives, data collection method, etc. The interviews were conducted via MS Teams and Zoom. The participants' permission to record the interviews were sought and this gave the researcher a good idea of the duration of the interviews and whether it would be a reasonable time allocation for the actual interviews.

At the end of the interviews, all the participants were asked to comment on the questions in terms of ambiguity. Where necessary, vague questions were amended but all the questions were retained for the actual interviews. The researcher transcribed the pilot interviews which provided a good opportunity to evaluate if the questions yielded a satisfactory variety of answers (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002). Data generated from the pilot interviews was not included in the research report and the individuals who participated in the pilot study were excluded from the final

investigation. This was done to avoid presenting a skewed picture of the findings as well as to prevent any doubts regarding the validity of the research outcome.

Collection of Data Through Semi-Structured Interviews. Individual interviews were conducted between 01 March and 23 April 2022; however, three additional interviews were conducted between 17 and 22 June 2022 with participants who initially agreed to take part in the study but could not confirm the appointments earlier due to work and other commitments. Two separate interview guides were used to collect the data. The first interview guide applied to the academic staff at the higher education institutions (see Appendix D) and the second interview guide was used for the interviews with the QA and Accreditation officers (see Appendix E). However, predominantly similar questions were posed to both sample groups. This was done to ensure the trustworthiness of the data. All interview protocols were meticulously followed. Dates and times that best suited the participants were confirmed before electronic MS Teams or Zoom links for the interviews were sent to them via email. Participants could also propose on which days they would like to have the interviews and whether they would do it from the comfort of their homes or offices. For example, some of the interviews took place over weekends. At the start of the interviews, the participants' permission was sought to record the interviews. The researcher tried to keep the tone of the interviews as formal as possible, i.e. formal titles of participants were used throughout the interviews and they were addressed in a respectful manner. At the end of the interviews, the participants were informed that the interview transcripts will be shared with them for confirmation of their responses, clarifications, or adding additional information, if necessary.

Collection of Data through Document Analysis. Whereas semi-structured individual interviews yielded primary data, document analysis was used to retrieve secondary data. Key documents related to the research were identified and accessed through the websites of the

EQA bodies. The legislative acts of the NCHE, NQA, HPCNA, and ECN were closely studied to collect data relevant to the research topic. These were the Higher Education Act 2003 (Act No. 26 of 2003), Namibia Qualifications Authority Act 1996 (Act No. 29 of 1996), Allied Health Professions Act 2004 (Act No. 7 of 2004), and the Engineering Profession Amendment Act 1991 (Act No. 25 of 1991). These legislative documents provided useful information about the functions assigned to the respective EQA bodies which complemented the data obtained through the semi-structured individual interviews.

Other official documents studied included the QA System for Higher Education in Namibia (2009) and the NQA Regulations for the Accreditation of Persons, Institutions, or Organisations (2006), which provided information about the programme accreditation criteria and processes. Furthermore, the Engineering Professions Bill (2019) was also included in the document analysis, as it provided valuable information relevant to the research topic. Lastly, a selection of annual and conference reports of the NQA, NCHE, and HPCNA were studied and useful sections about the programme accreditation function of these EQA bodies were analysed.

Analysis of Data. The researcher analysed the data manually. Deductive and inductive thematic analysis was employed to generate findings to provide answers to the research questions (Azungah, 2018; Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022). The literature review, research questions and interview questions guided the researcher to identify codes and themes in the deductive data analysis approach, while with the inductive data analysis method, the researcher identified codes and themes by repeatedly reading the raw data (Azungah, 2018). This was an intensive, tedious, and reiterative process, but it accorded the researcher the opportunity to engage first-hand with the raw data. The same data analysis procedures were followed to analyse data generated from the semi-structured individual interviews and the document analysis, i.e. the data analysis steps of

CIRT (2019) and Kriukow's (2020) steps for qualitative coding and thematic analysis in Microsoft Word. The following three main steps were followed: coding the data, cleaning the data, and developing a thematic framework.

The data coding step entailed copying and pasting each participant's responses into a separate table in a Word document, then the researcher carefully screened the data repeatedly to reflect on the participants' responses to the research questions and decide which pieces of data were worth retaining. Each transcript was then coded separately in different Word documents. In cleaning up the data, another Word document was opened where all the codes from the various transcripts were copied and pasted into different columns. Throughout this process, the researcher ensured that the code names were consistent within the different transcripts to create a code frame of consistent names. A thematic framework was then developed by creating topics or themes from the codes, guided by the main research questions. Where necessary, sub-themes were also developed, and even sub-sub-themes. The researcher also developed a concept map to present the research results in a visualised format (Ligita, Nurjannah, Wicking, Harvey & Francis, 2022). The following main themes were identified based on the data collected and analysed and the research questions: functions of EQA bodies; views about overlaps; effects of perceived overlapping functions; benefits of programme accreditation; challenges for higher education institutions; and suggestions for improvement. These themes are presented in detail in the next section.

Presentation of Results

This section presents an overview of the results that were derived from the thematic analysis of the interviews conducted and the documents analysed. Before the results are presented, an overview of the demographic information of the participants and their background and experience in EQA are provided.

Demographic Information of Participants

Individual in-depth interviews were conducted with twenty participants, i.e. Associate Deans: Teaching and Learning, Head of Departments, Programme Coordinators, and QA and Accreditation officers, of whom seven were males and thirteen females. At the universities, participants were drawn from various faculties, i.e. Computing and Informatics; Commerce, Human Sciences and Education; Engineering and the Built Environment; Health, Applied Sciences and Natural Resources (NUST); and Information and Communications Technology (IUM). Participants from the EQA bodies were selected from the Accreditation, Assessment and Audit Department (NQA); Department of Education and Training QA and the Professional Affairs Division (HPCNA); and the QA Unit (NCHE). The full details of the demographics are presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Demographic Information of Participants

Demographic Characteristics	Participants
Gender:	
Male	7
Female	13
Total	20
Position:	
Associate Deans: Teaching and Learning	3
Head of Departments	6
Programme Coordinators	4
QA and Accreditation Officers	7
Total	20
Name of Faculty/Department:	
Universities	
Faculty of Computing and Informatics	2
Faculty of Commerce, Human Sciences and Education	3

Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment	3
Faculty of Health, Applied Sciences and Natural Resources	4
Faculty of Information and Communications Technology	1
EQA Bodies	
Accreditation, Assessment and Audit Department	3
Department of Education and Training Quality Assurance	1
Professional Affairs Division	1
QA Unit	2
Total	20

The next section provides a summary of the background and experience of the participants.

Background and Experience in EQA. From the point of transcribing the interviews to analysing the data, it was evident that all the academic staff members interviewed were involved in programme accreditation exercises, be it with the accreditation of academic or professional programmes. While some of the participants only indicated that they were involved in programme accreditation before, others reported that they “have been extensively involved in programme ... accreditation”, “went through so many programme accreditations”, or “have been involved with the validation of ... programmes since probably 2001”. The involvement of participants in programme accreditation was a key element to capture their views and experiences about the perceived overlapping functions of the EQA bodies and their effect on Namibia’s higher education institutions. The academic staff also described the different roles they fulfilled during programme accreditation, which included spearheading or coordinating the whole process, writing or contributing to the drafting of the self-evaluation report, collecting and preparing the evidence documents, ensuring that staff and students are informed about their involvement in the accreditation interviews, approving credentials of potential review panel members, contributing to

verification of facts in draft review panel reports, and compiling improvement plans to address accreditation conditions and/or recommendations. With regards to their experience with the EQA bodies (i.e. NQA, NCHE, HPCNA, and ECN), most of the academic staff reported that their programmes are accredited by the NCHE, followed by the NQA, HPCNA, and the ECN. A few indicated that their programmes are accredited by other EQA bodies, nationally, regionally, and internationally.

In terms of the QA and Accreditation officers, their involvement and experience in programme accreditation varied from five to twelve years. Their roles at their respective workstations varied as follows: managing the entire accreditation process; training and orienting staff of higher education institutions on their QA systems and procedures; receiving and scrutinising programme accreditation applications; conducting desktop reviews of the documents submitted for accreditation; recruiting review panel members and accompanying them on site visits; and viewing and scrutinising the reports compiled by review panels.

The thematic analysis of the data obtained in the semi-structured individual interviews and the documents analysed delivered six major themes, i.e. Theme 1: Functions of EQA bodies; Theme 2: Views about overlaps; Theme 3: Effects of perceived overlapping functions; Theme 4: Benefits of programme accreditation; Theme 5: Challenges for higher education institutions; and Theme 6: Suggestions for improvement. Table 5 presents the main themes including the sub-themes and sub-sub-themes identified during the data analysis process.

Table 5

Themes, Sub-themes, and Sub-sub-themes Identified in Analysed Data

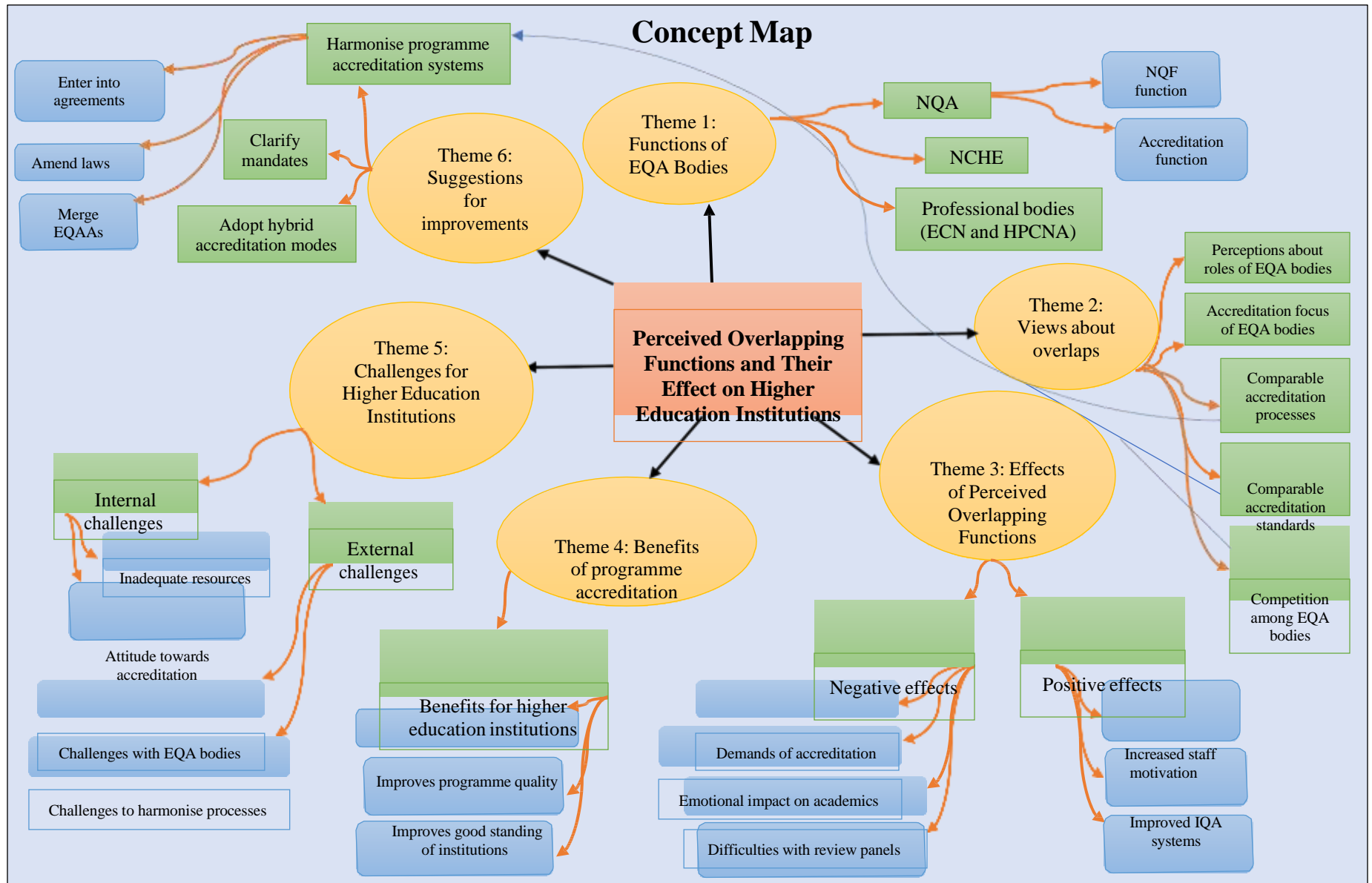
Main Research Question	Name of Theme	Name of Sub-theme	Name of Sub-sub-theme
What functions are the NCHE, NQA, HPCNA and ECN mandated to undertake as per their respective legislations?	Theme 1: Functions of EQA bodies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Functions of the NQA ○ Functions of the NCHE ○ Functions of professional bodies (ECN and HPCNA) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - NQF function - Accreditation function
Main Research Question	Name of Theme	Name of Sub-theme	Name of Sub-sub-theme
What are the perceptions and views of the higher education institutions, the QAAs and professional bodies as regards the seemingly overlapping functions?	Theme 2: Views about overlaps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Perceptions about roles of EQA bodies ○ Accreditation focus of EQA bodies ○ Comparable accreditation processes ○ Comparable accreditation standards ○ Competition among EQA bodies 	
Main Research Question	Name of Theme	Name of Sub-theme	Name of Sub-sub-theme
How do the overlapping functions of NCHE, NQA, HPCNA, and ECN affect Namibia's higher education institutions?	Theme 3: Effects of perceived overlapping functions Theme 4: Benefits of programme accreditation	○ Positive effects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increased staff motivation - Improved IQA systems - Increased stakeholder trust
		○ Negative effects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Demands of accreditation - Emotional impact on academics - Difficulties with review panels - Decreased trust in accreditation outcomes

		○ Benefits for higher education institutions	- Improves programme quality - Improves good standing of institutions - Creates opportunities for institutions and students
	Theme 5: Challenges for higher education institutions	○ Internal challenges	- Inadequate resources - Attitude towards accreditation
		○ External challenges	- Challenges with EQA bodies - Challenges to harmonise processes
	Theme 6: Suggestions for improvement	○ Harmonise programme accreditation systems	- Enter into agreements - Amend laws - Merge EQAAs
		○ Clarify mandates ○ Adopt hybrid accreditation modes	

Concept maps are used to paint a picture of the views of participants in a succinct manner (Ligita et al., 2022). Hence, the researcher designed a concept map, as shown in Figure 8, to present a visualisation of the themes, sub-themes, and sub-sub-themes that were identified in the thematic analysis of the interview transcripts and the documents analysed.

Figure 8

Concept Map to Present Themes, Sub-themes, and Sub-sub-themes



Creates opportunities for
institutions and students

Decreased trust in
accreditation outcomes

Increased
stakeholder trust

184

Research Question 1: What functions are the NCHE, NQA, HPCNA, and ECN mandated to undertake as per their respective legislations?

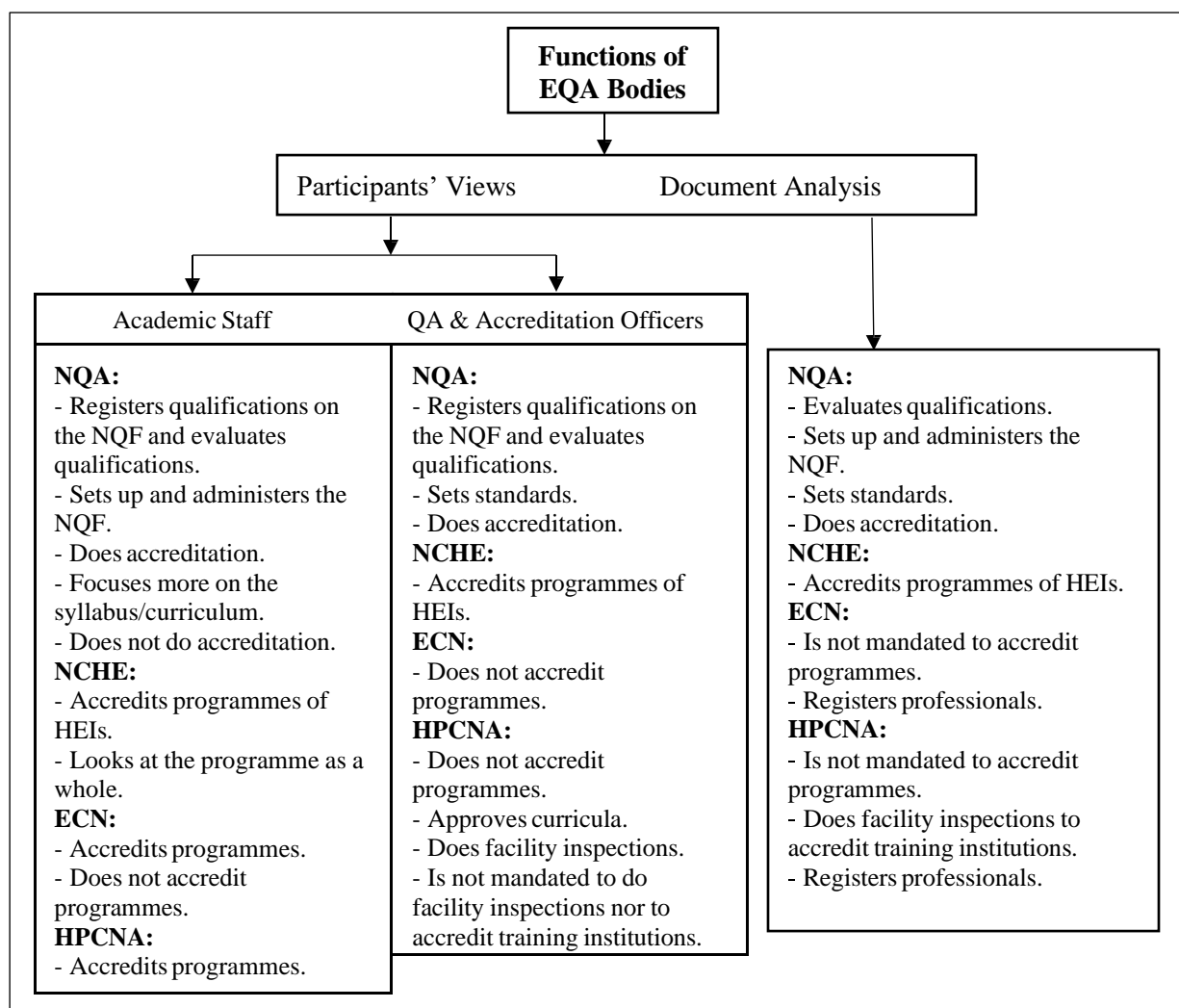
The purpose of this question was to explore the views of the participants concerning the mandates of the NQA, NCHE, HPCNA, and ECN. There was a sub-question under this research question that asked the participants how they understand the functions of the four EQA bodies.

Theme 1: Functions of EQA Bodies

Theme 1 presents the findings on the functions of the EQA bodies (Figure 9) as obtained through the document analysis and the individual interviews to provide an insight into whether and to what extent their functions overlap.

Figure 9

Functions of EQA Bodies



Sub-theme 1.1: Functions of the NQA

It is important to accentuate that pseudonyms have been used throughout the presentation of the results and the discussion of the findings as well as in the subsequent chapters. The analysis of data revealed two functions of the, NQA viz. its role in terms of the NQF and its role in terms of accreditation. The subsequent sections present the two distinct functions of the NQA.

Sub-sub-theme 1.1.1: NQF Function of the NQA. Most of the participants agreed that the NQA is mainly responsible for registering qualifications on the NQF. Sheila, HoD, commented: “In terms of registering specific programmes on the Framework, that would be NQA ... The way that I understand its purpose, is to basically register the specific programmes on the Framework. So, that's their main purpose.” while Sandra, QA and Accreditation Officer, said that “the NQA mainly registers qualifications on the NQF. Mainly, they work with the registration of qualifications. But the NQA, for me, is more about qualifications”. According to Mary, a Programme Coordinator, the NQA is the supreme body charged with the registration of qualifications on the NQF, as she replied:

The NQA, I think, is the highest authority when it comes to tertiary education with regards to registration of programmes, but also to make sure that the programme is registered and meets the requirements of the NQF level that you are applying for.

Another function of the NQA highlighted by several participants is the evaluation of qualifications. Doreen, Associate Dean for Teaching and Learning, noted that “the NQA is the body that actually evaluates whether the qualifications that we offer are at the standard at which they have been developed and whether they’re relevant here, in Namibia”. In addition, the document analysis indicated that one of the objects of the NQA is to evaluate qualifications.

Section 3 (a) (i) of the NQA Act 29 of 1996 stated the following: “The objects of the NQA are to inquire into whether any particular qualification meets the national standards.” The latter was confirmed by Tuyeni, one of the QA and Accreditation officers, when she said: “... NQA [is] also responsible for the evaluation of qualifications.”

Furthermore, only a few participants indicated that the NQA also sets up and administers the qualifications framework. One interviewee stated that:

The Namibia Qualifications Authority, in my mind, sets [up] the general framework as to how qualifications need to be levelled in terms of the NQF levels all the way from secondary through to tertiary education, making sure that there is adequate progression between those. (Peter, HoD)

Denver, Associate Dean for Teaching and Learning, said that “[the NQA] sets up the framework to achieve an ultimate goal of quality”. In support of the preceding statement, the following extracts were obtained through the analysis of respectively the NQA Act and the Quality Assurance System for Higher Education in Namibia:

“The objects of the NQA are to set up and administer a national qualifications framework.” (NQA Act 29 of 1996)

“NQA also has a responsibility through the NQA Act to set up and administer a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) on which qualifications, including those of higher education, are registered.” (Quality Assurance System for Higher Education in Namibia, 2009)

In addition, Denver argued that the NQA’s mandate ends with guaranteeing compliance with the NQF, as he put it: “Their clear mandate is to ensure that you comply with the Framework that is designed. I think their mandate ends there.”

One more function of the NQA that came to light was the setting of standards. For example, Beauty, QA and Accreditation Officer, remarked: “My understanding when it comes to the NQA, I think they only have the function to set the qualification standards ...” The analysis of the NQA Act revealed that “the objects of the NQA are to set ... occupational standards ... curriculum standards ... [and] national standards for qualifications.”

Sub-sub-theme 1.1.2: Accreditation Function of the NQA. The document analysis revealed that the NQA indeed has an accreditation function, though the notion of ‘programme accreditation’ is not explicitly stated in the NQA’s legislation. For example, section 13 (1) (a) of the NQA Act stipulated that “any person, institution, or organisation providing instruction or training may apply to the NQA ... for accreditation that such person, institution, or organisation has the capacity to provide a course or courses of instruction or training ...”. Considering this statement, the accreditation function mentioned in the NQA Act rather seemed like institutional accreditation or audit, instead of programme accreditation. The latter was confirmed by Nancy who stated that: “The NQA has other functions besides accreditation. [It] ... [does] ... re-accreditation which is an audit.” (QA and Accreditation Officer)

Equally, the Quality Assurance System for Higher Education in Namibia stated that: “The NQA Act makes provision for any person, institution, or organisation providing instruction or training to apply to NQA for accreditation. The NQA Act makes provision for the Minister of Education ... to make regulations regarding requirements for accreditation.” Again, this document was silent on whether the regulations are meant for programme or institutional accreditation.

However, while the analysis of the NQA Regulations for the Accreditation of Persons, Institutions or Organisations (2006) showed that it is written in the same tune, namely that the

“... regulations apply to persons seeking accreditation, re-accreditation or expansion of educational services and to accredited bodies”, it also stated that “an applicant shall seek accreditation for a course or courses”. Such a statement will most probably beg the question if the word ‘course’ can be substituted with ‘programme’. It could also be a matter of using different terminologies for the same thing. Nonetheless, according to Precious, the NQA’s mandate is to accredit institutions, as she said: “The NQA, as per the NQA Act, is mandated to conduct accreditation of institutions.” (QA and Accreditation Officer)

While the legislative documents that were analysed were a bit vague as to whether the NQA’s mandate includes the accreditation of programmes per se, it came to light in one of the interviews that the NQA, when conducting institutional accreditation, simultaneously assesses the quality of the programmes which is generally regarded as programme accreditation. The following response of Sandra, QA and Accreditation Officer, clarified the ambiguity:

And, when they go out for ... institutional accreditation, they also look at the programmes that the institution offers. NQA doesn't call it programme accreditation, but institutional accreditation, but when they go and look at the institution, they also look at the programmes the institution is offering.

Still, a minority of the participants expressed the belief that the NQA accredits programmes. One interviewee said: “... as I said ... the programmes were accredited by the Namibia Qualifications Authority (NQA) ...” (Simon, acting Associate Dean: Teaching and Learning) and Eon, Programme Coordinator, commented: “So, NQA is the national body responsible for the accreditation of persons, institutions and programmes.” One of the participants differed from the aforesaid and was not convinced that the NQA has an accreditation function at

all, as he said: “NQA, to my understanding, is not an accrediting body.” (Denver, Associate Dean: Teaching and Learning)

Sub-theme 1.2: Functions of the NCHE

There was consensus among the participants that the NCHE is responsible for programme accreditation. Considering the comments below, it was evident that the NCHE is the actual body mandated to accredit the programmes of higher education institutions:

“The only institution that is mandated to say, go ahead, you fully satisfy all the norms and standards of accreditation, is the NCHE ...” (Denver, Associate Dean: Teaching and Learning)

“The National Council for Higher Education, from the context of the programmes that we have developed, they are the ones who are responsible for accrediting the programmes ...” (Simon, acting Associate Dean: Teaching and Learning)

Following on that, Avukile, HoD, convincingly remarked: “NCHE is actually doing the proper accreditation of the programmes themselves.” In addition, Precious, one of the QA and Accreditation officers, replied: “NCHE [is] conducting programme accreditation.” while Sandra confirmed that “... a programme must be offered once it is accredited by the NCHE”. (QA and Accreditation Officer)

In addition, an analysis of the Higher Education Act 26 of 2003 and the Quality Assurance System for Higher Education in Namibia (2009) respectively revealed that “the NCHE ... accredits ... programmes of higher education provided at higher education institutions” and “an institution that intends to offer a new programme, should apply to NCHE for accreditation of the programme”.

There was also the notion that the NCHE is regulating higher education and as a result, it would automatically on a cyclical basis accredit the programmes offered by higher education

institutions, as commented by Alina, HoD: “NCHE, I understand, regulates all higher education institutions and their qualifications. So, when one designs a programme and one is offering that programme, they would periodically accredit the programme ...”

Some other responses provided by the interviewees are that the NCHE’s function goes beyond the NQA’s and professional bodies’, and that the NCHE has a wider scope regarding the accreditation of programmes. For example, one of the programme coordinators, Denise, indicated that “the National Council for Higher Education looks at the quality of the programme. While NQA looks at the syllabus or the curriculum, NCHE will go down to the assessments, the marking, the institution, so that's a more detailed accreditation”. Furthermore, Mary, a Programme Coordinator, replied as follows: “The NCHE, for me, I think applies to all the programmes within the institution, not like the other councils, like HPCNA, that only applies to Health Sciences. So, I think they feature more throughout the institution.” while Mercia, an HoD, remarked: “NCHE looks at a wider spectrum at the institution; the faculty, department, the syllabus and the programme, while NQA focuses only on the syllabus...NQA does not come to the institution and look at the infrastructure.”

Sub-theme 1.3: Functions of Professional Bodies (ECN and HPCNA)

Analysis of the interview transcripts as well as the document analysis produced similar responses concerning the functions of the ECN and the HPCNA, hence the findings for both professional bodies are presented in this section.

Responses about the functions of the ECN and the HPCNA revealed two opposing views in terms of programme accreditation. Some interviewees, though only a few, indicated that these two professional bodies accredit programmes, while others did not think they play a role in the accreditation of programmes. For instance, Alina, HoD, remarked: “I know that both Councils

oversee qualifications that are offered in their domains. So, the Health Professions Council oversees and accredits programmes in the health field, while the Engineering Council is for the engineering field.” However, Denver, Associate Dean for Teaching and Learning, stressed the fact that the ECN does not have the mandate to accredit programmes, when he stated: “So, what I want to emphasise here is that the Engineering Council of Namibia is not an accrediting body ... they are just an advisory body, not an accrediting body ...” In agreement with Denver, another interviewee replied: “The Engineering Council of Namibia is a professional body ... if my mind serves me well, they indicated that they are not so much involved in accrediting programmes.” (Aletta, QA and Accreditation Officer)

In terms of the HPCNA, Beauty, QA and Accreditation Officer, commented as follows: “Normally, [HPCNA] does not do programme accreditation per se ... [it] evaluates the curriculum to see that the content meets the requirements, and ... then approves the programme. That should be it.” Another QA and Accreditation Officer, Sandra, further explained: “The Health Professions Council, for example, is not really doing programme accreditation. They look at the curriculum for health programmes offered by higher education institutions. They do what they call approval of the curriculum and facility inspection.” By the look of things, it is clear that the HPCNA is not mandated to accredit programmes as such, but that it only evaluates and approves curricula. However, it could also be a matter of using the wrong terminologies.

Furthermore, with regards to the ECN, an interesting observation revealed through the document analysis was that the Engineering Profession Amendment Act 25 of 1991 did not include programme accreditation as one of the ECN’s functions, and because of that, the ECN was in the process of amending this Act to cater for the accreditation of engineering programmes

offered by higher education institutions as stipulated in section 14 (1) (a) and (b) of the Engineering Professions Bill 2019:

The Council shall ... determine the process and manner in which the accreditation of academic programmes in engineering will be conducted [and] require that any person or institution wishing to offer programmes of an engineering nature at tertiary level first seek approval and accreditation of such programmes before the commencement of the programmes.

This finding was confirmed by one of the QA and Accreditation officers, Sandra, when she said:

The last meeting we had with them, they were amending their Act because they didn't have programme accreditation as part of their functions or duties. So, since they are amending their Act, now, I don't know. Maybe it is included now, but in the past it was not.

Apropos to the HPCNA, an analysis of the Allied Health Professions Act 7 of 2004 did also not reveal any programme accreditation related functions of this body. However, through the document analysis, it was revealed that the HPCNA accredits facilities and by so doing, an inspection of or visit to the institutions is conducted. This was evident in the analysis of the 2020-2021 Annual Report of the HPCNA that indicated that the “Education and Training Quality Assurance Department facilitated the inspections of health facilities and educational facilities [to] ensure accreditation of training institutions for health-related professions and health facilities”. However, a remarkable revelation in the analysis of the interview transcripts was that the HPCNA is actually not mandated to do facility inspections, as explained by Beauty, QA and Accreditation Officer: “However, our law really doesn't require that we do accreditation of the facilities, but just to reassure ourselves that the institutions have the necessary human capacity

as well as the required resources to offer the programme, we just do it ...” This was an indication that the HPCNA is overstepping its mandate to assure the quality of the programmes in the professions it oversees.

Furthermore, other responses indicated that the ECN and the HPCNA have specialised functions in that they need to ensure that the programmes relevant to their respective professional fields are in tandem with the needs of the industry, because both councils have a function to register professionals in their domains. With reference to this finding, Mercia, HoD, commented: “The Health Council and the Engineering Council are specialised councils. They are specialised in a certain industry. They make sure that your programmes align with that specific industry ... because those are the actual experts of the industry.” In the analysis of both professional bodies’ laws, the following extracts concerning the registration of professionals were discovered: “... any person who desires to be registered as a professional engineer shall lodge with the council ... an application in writing for such registration” (Section 11 (1) of the Engineering Profession Amendment Act 25 of 1991), while one of the objects of the HPCNA is “... to ensure that all persons practising such professions [as per section 18 (1)] are suitably qualified and able to practise the profession concerned, and are registered” (Section 5 (b) (i) of the Allied Health Professions Act 7 of 2004).

Overall, these findings indicate that the Higher Education Act 26 of 2003 mandates the NCHE to conduct programme accreditation at higher education institutions, while the NQA Act 29 of 1996 mandates the NQA to mainly oversee the functions related to the NQF, but to also conduct institutional accreditation that seems to subsume programme accreditation. In the case of the professional bodies, the ECN and HPCNA are in the same boat concerning the

accreditation of programmes in their respective professions, as none of these bodies are mandated by their individual laws to conduct programme accreditation.

The next section presents the findings on the participants' views about the perceived overlapping functions.

Research Question 2: What are the perceptions and views of the higher education institutions, the EQAAs, and professional bodies as regards the seemingly overlapping functions?

This question tried to establish the participants' views about the seemingly overlapping functions of the EQA bodies.

Theme 2: Views about Overlaps

Several sub-themes related to this theme were identified during the data analysis stage and are presented in the subsequent sections.

Sub-theme 2.1: Perceptions about Roles of EQA Bodies

Before the participants were asked to comment on the general perception about the perceived overlapping functions of Namibia's EQA bodies, the researcher wanted to stimulate their thoughts on the issue and asked them to state their stance on the multiple EQA bodies in Namibia. Two divergent discourses emerged. Firstly, there was a feeling that all the EQA bodies are needed to satisfy the needs of stakeholders in higher education. Jasper, Programme Coordinator, explained: "There is a place for all quality assurance bodies in Namibia to ensure that services and programmes meet the needs, expectations and requirements of industries and our students." Secondly, an argument was put forth that it was needless to assign the same functions to two different EQAAs because that decision caused the overlaps in the functions of the NQA and the NCHE, and although these bodies are lawfully acting within their domains, it

impacts their operations in such a way that feelings of frustration could be sensed among the staff of the EQAAs. Tuyeni, QA and Accreditation Officer, commented as follows:

I know NQA came into existence in 1996. There was no need for NCHE to do precisely the same functions that NQA is carrying out. **It was a duplication of something that is already in existence** ... I don't know how they ended up approving functions that are duplicating what is already in existence.

Another comment was as follows:

You know, these institutions were created by Acts of Parliament that mandate [them] to do whatever they are doing now ... but we, on the ground, when you look at the other side of it, you really see that it's not working. **It's really not working** ... And there are overlaps that were created through these or the functions that were given to the institutions. (Sandra, QA and Accreditation Officer)

With reference to participants' responses on the general perception about the perceived overlapping functions of Namibia's EQA bodies, there was an overall agreement among the interviewees that the roles of the EQA bodies indeed overlap, except for two participants who reasoned that they never experienced that the functions of the NQA and NCHE intersect, as they have different roles. The one respondent replied: "I never actually saw them as doing the same thing or their functions overlapping. I never saw that." (Avukile, HoD), while the other respondent said "... they both have different functions" (Mercia, HoD). She continued to say: "To be honest, I don't know what overlap people are seeing ... my understanding of the two accreditations done by NQA and NCHE is that they are quite different activities."

Statements about the overlapping roles, especially between the NQA and the NCHE, appeared recurrently across the interview transcripts, where participants felt that the EQAAs are duplicating each other's work. It also came to light that even the higher education institutions are continuously questioning them about the status quo during official gatherings and that this has become a matter of concern. For instance, Aletta, QA and Accreditation Officer, commented:

The functions indeed are overlapping, because if you dissect their functions, you actually realise that they are doing the same thing. It can be done differently, but in the end, they are all doing the same thing ... Yes! The functions indeed overlap, and I think it's becoming a worrisome something, because institutions are forever mentioning it. Whatever stakeholder engagement you have with them, they'll forever mention the various overlapping functions.

Precious, QA and Accreditation Officer, agreed that the institutions have good reason to raise concerns about the overlaps, as she put it: "The institutions are correct if they say that, because they will find the NQA coming to do the same thing and NCHE also coming to do what was done by NQA. So, their perception is correct. There is that overlapping." She went on to explain: "... you receive one certificate from NQA, you receive another one from NCHE, but they are looking at almost the same things."

The document analysis revealed that the NCHE's programme accreditation sub-system is mandatory to all the programmes offered by higher education institutions. The following extract is evident to this: "NCHE's programme accreditation system applies to all types of higher education academic programmes." (Quality Assurance System for Higher Education in Namibia, 2009) This means that the NCHE could still accredit a programme that was already accredited by other EQA bodies, which reprises the cycle of duplication. One interviewee expressed the

feeling that despite the existing overlaps, it is important that programmes are still accredited by their respective professional bodies. She replied: “There's definitely an overlap, but I can see that this is necessary that our programmes go through their professional bodies.” (Denise, Programme Coordinator) Talking about this issue, a belief was expressed that the professional bodies are without doubt part of the system and that they are vital. Alina, HoD, commented:

I can understand that professional bodies need to exist. Regulations for professional bodies need to exist; **that** we cannot do without. There's a lot of overlap, but like I said, with the professional bodies, it is necessary for them to oversee those particular professions.

Furthermore, a notable remark was made about the EQA bodies just trying to defend their mandates, that they kind of adopted a going-with-the-flow type of attitude, although they are quite aware of the concerns about the overlapping roles, as explained by one interviewee:

Okay, we are just protecting our own area, not really looking at the whole picture. It looks as if [UVW] was mandated by the Act to do this, so let us just do that, but we don't really consider the perception out there, how people perceive us, and it is not a good image that we are portraying. (Sandra, QA and Accreditation Officer)

On the other hand, the responses took a rather optimistic tone, as some participants were of the understanding that multiple EQA bodies may increase efficiency and that their functions could complement each other. Nancy, QA and Accreditation Officer, explained:

... our higher [education] institutions are growing very fast in Namibia, so having different quality bodies ... a lot can be done rather than if you have maybe only

one, otherwise you will have a challenge to visit all of them if you are only one body and few staff.

In support of the latter response, Avukile, HoD, reasoned that “if the functions of NQA and NCHE do overlap, the effect will be that of check and balances ... if one misses something, the other will pick it up”.

In addition, what came to light in this whole discourse is that the EQA bodies have their own unique or niche areas that they are focussing on when doing programme accreditation. This sub-theme is discussed next.

Sub-theme 2.2: Accreditation Focus of EQA Bodies

Findings revealed that although there is a perception that the EQA bodies’ functions overlap, the accreditation conducted by the respective bodies has a different focus, which warrants each one’s existence in quality assuring the programmes offered by Namibia’s higher education institutions. However, another interesting comment was made in that the general perception about the overlapping functions is due to a lack of understanding or confusion about the roles of the EQA bodies. Eon, Programme Coordinator, commented: “I think that there's a misperception about what the different bodies do. Yes, there is a great deal of overlap, but they all approach the programmes and the quality assurance from different points of view.”

Furthermore, it came to light that the NCHE’s accreditation is input-based while the professional bodies do an output-based validation, and because of this distinction there can hardly be an intersection of functions, according to Peter, HoD, who replied:

What the professional bodies do ... is not accreditation, in the sense of input-based accreditation, but output-based validation of a programme. In the case where you have input-based accreditation by the NCHE and output-based

accreditation by the professional body, I think one cannot really speak of duplication. It just might happen that these things happen at the same time ...

Another issue that further contributed to the overlaps was the view that the EQA bodies have similar accreditation processes. The findings on this sub-theme are presented in the following section.

Sub-theme 2.3: Comparable Accreditation Processes

When the participants were asked to explain the processes that the EQA bodies follow when conducting programme accreditation, some of them were convinced that they follow similar processes. Alina, HoD, explained the processes that the NCHE and HPCNA follow:

“... if it is a brand new programme, you will notify them that you have developed a new programme and then they would send you a self-evaluation report template which you are supposed to complete ... They would constitute an evaluation panel ... then that panel would visit the institution during which interviews will be conducted ... Then, after that, the panel would usually compile a report and decide if the programme should be accredited or not, after which feedback is provided to the institution. So, that's usually the process. The processes are quite similar, both for NCHE and for the Health Professional Council.

From the perspective of the QA and Accreditation officers, Liina, who agreed that the processes overlap, commented:

Last year, we engaged the NCHE and NQA to look at what each of these bodies are doing and we came to understand that they do actually almost the same things, because they also do inspections, and they follow almost the same processes as HPCNA.

Considering these comments, it is evident that the NQA, NCHE, and HPCNA follow the same processes when conducting programme accreditation, i.e. expecting a SER/checklist to be completed by the institutions, conducting a site visit, compiling a review panel report, and providing an accreditation outcome to institutions. The programme accreditation processes for the ECN were not particularly prominent in the interview data “since ... we could not look at similarities and differences, because they didn't have accreditation as one of their functions”, as explained by Sandra, QA and Accreditation Officer. However, one of the participants disagreed because he believed that the EQA bodies apply different programme accreditation processes. An HoD, Avukile, replied: “Yes, I notice differences in the processes ... NQA does not come to the department to ask for documentation and staff profiles ... uh ... facilities. I've never seen NQA doing all those things.”

In addition, the findings revealed that the EQA bodies use similar accreditation criteria that also contribute to duplication in the accreditation of programmes. The following section presents these findings.

Sub-theme 2.4: Comparable Accreditation Standards

Perceptions about the criteria or standards used in programme accreditation were also shared. Analyses of the data sets revealed that the NQA, NCHE, and HPCNA consider similar criteria when conducting programme accreditation, which boils down to a duplication of efforts. Mary, one of the Programme Coordinators, replied: “I think 90% of NQA, NCHE and HPCNA are looking at the same thing.” while Simon, acting Associate Dean for Teaching and Learning, said: “... NQA checks on themes like facilities, infrastructure, finances and many other things which, incidentally, are the themes that are checked upon by the National Council for Higher Education.” The fact that there are similarities in the accreditation criteria was also agreed upon

by Sandra, QA and Accreditation Officer, as she replied: “They are also looking at the facilities, physical resources, and online subscriptions of books. So, I think, when you look at what the Health Professions Council is doing it's very similar to what we are doing.”

Furthermore, the document analysis revealed that the NQA and the NCHE are considering the same broad themes or standards when accrediting programmes, i.e. “aims and objectives, curriculum, assessment, staff, facilities and support, internal quality assurance, financial resources, outcomes, and research” (Quality Assurance System for Higher Education in Namibia, 2009; NQA Regulations for the Accreditation of Persons, Institutions or Organisations, 2006).

A noteworthy concern that emerged was the fact that the EQAAs are in competition with each other, because of the similar functions assigned to them. The next sub-theme deals with this issue.

Sub-theme 2.5: Competition Among EQA Bodies

When asked about their perception on the perceived overlapping functions of the EQA bodies, some participants expressed concern about the tendency of the EQAAs to see each other as rivals. It also gave the impression that the EQAAs were not so sure about the roles assigned to them and that situation contributed to the duplication. For instance, Mbongi, HoD, argued: “The NCHE and the NQA seem not to understand their roles or, rather ... they are not very clear. Then, it tends to be like duplication or then people, in some instances, may tend to want to contend for visibility.” This tendency also resulted in the EQAAs not making an effort to cooperate or try to find a solution to the status quo. The feeling was that such attitude was not helping the QAAs to perform their tasks more efficiently nor did it contribute to them working towards a common goal. Another interviewee explained as follows:

Is like they are enemies, and because of this, they don't try to complement their activities, to say, NQA you start from here and ends there. NCHE, where I end, is where you start. So, the sooner that element of rivalry comes in, then it means you tend to defeat the major purpose for which that particular institution is created.

(Denver, Associate Dean: Teaching and Learning)

Another concern was expressed about the rivalry spirit between the EQAAs (NQA and NCHE) that leaves the higher education institutions at the short end of the stick, because of lack of cooperation between the two bodies that seemed disorganised and involved in a power struggle. From the point of view of a QA and Accreditation Officer, Aletta, the following was commented:

At times, even the workers themselves are confused. They don't know which institution is to do what and ... when you are trying to work together, the other institutions want to be on top and boss the other one, and the other one wants to be more powerful. So, in the end, it's just confusion and conflict, and the institutions are suffering, because the external quality assurance agencies cannot iron out their differences and decide what needs to be done.

Together, these findings provide important insights into the perceptions of the participants about the overlapping functions. The results revealed consensus among the participants that the functions of the EQA bodies indeed overlap; however, the overlaps are mainly between the NQA and the NCHE.

The findings also revealed some effects of the overlapping findings on the higher education institutions, which are presented in the following section.

Research Question 3: How do the overlapping functions of the NCHE, NQA, HPCNA, and ECN affect Namibia's higher education institutions?

The purpose of the third research question was to establish what effects the overlaps in the QA functions of the NQA, NCHE, HPCNA, and ECN have on Namibia's higher education institutions.

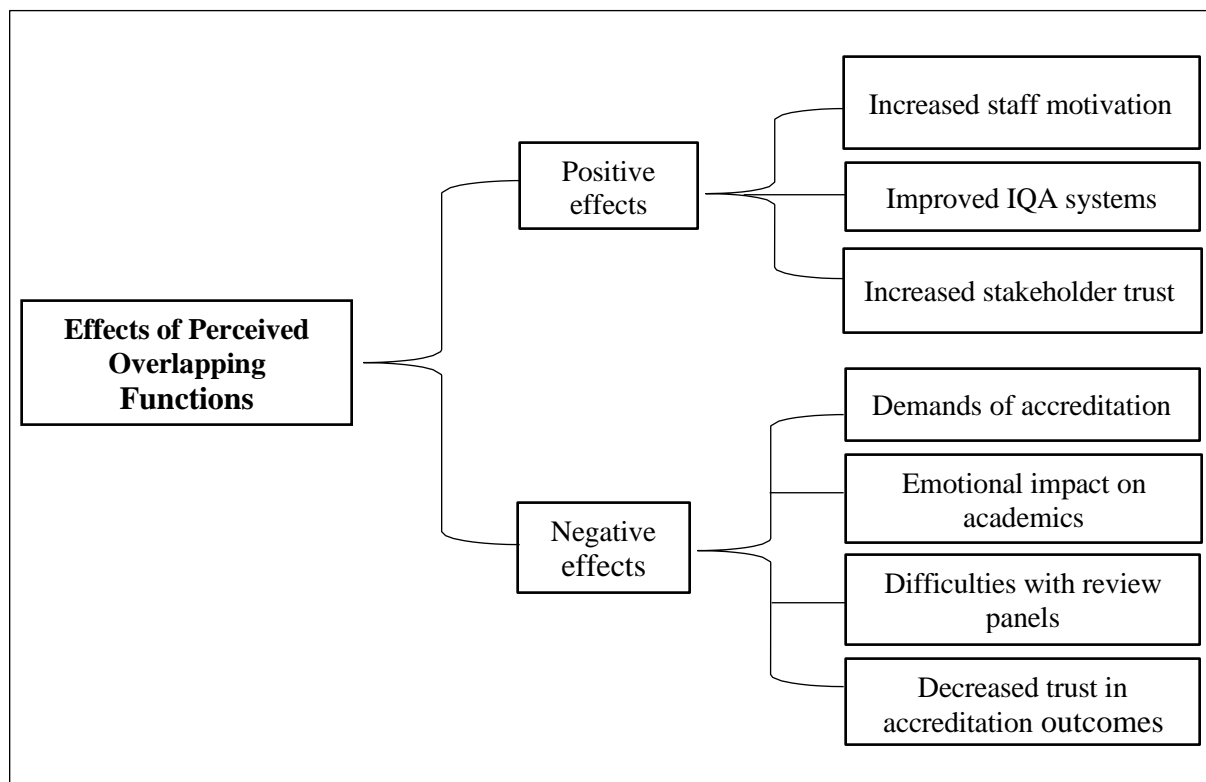
Theme 3: Effects of Perceived Overlapping Functions

Under this theme, two sub-themes, i.e. positive and negative effects were identified.

Figure 10 provides a summary of these sub-themes.

Figure 10

Effects of Perceived Overlapping Functions



The detailed findings in relation to these sub-themes are presented in the subsequent sections.

Sub-theme 3.1: Positive Effects

Based on the third research question, the participants were asked to comment on the effects of EQA on higher education institutions, and the findings revealed some positive effects of programme accreditation conducted by the EQA bodies. The following positive effects of accreditation, i.e. increased staff motivation, improved IQA systems, and increased stakeholder trust, were identified as sub-sub-themes under this sub-theme and are presented in the next section.

Sub-sub-theme 3.1.1: Increased Staff Motivation. The findings revealed that positive accreditation outcomes motivate academics to always try their best to offer a quality education to students. One of the Associate Deans for Teaching and Learning, Doreen, said:

... if you get full accreditation, it serves as a motivation for the staff to do much better, to put in more effort. You know, you always update your material, you always make sure that you've got the newest technologies and information and everything ready.

Another interviewee remarked: “They keep us in line. They keep us on our toes.” (Mercia, HoD)

According to Simon, acting Associate Dean for Teaching and Learning, some institutions go the extra mile to ensure that everything is in place to meet the requirements of accreditation, because they want their programmes to be accredited. He responded:

Some institutions were not really in a position to acquire some of the equipment that they need for the programmes, but because they know that there is accreditation that is coming, plans are put in motion to make sure that adequate

resources, be it teaching resources, learning resources, library resources, or appropriately qualified staff, are given a priority.

The drive within the institutions for continuous quality enhancement further contributed to improved IQA systems in higher education institutions. This finding is presented in the following section.

Sub-sub-theme 3.1.2: Improved IQA Systems. The findings revealed that the QA processes of the EQA bodies have contributed to higher education institutions making special efforts to improve IQA by changing certain systems and practices to the advantage of staff and students. One of the programme coordinators, Eon, explained: “For example, what the Council through my intervention, way back, managed to do was to change this institution’s system or the inherited system of moderation and examination.” Another significant development because of programme accreditation conducted by the EQA bodies is the establishment of IQA units or offices in higher education institutions that drive these QA processes. This positive development was recognised by one of the QA and Accreditation Officers, Aletta, who said:

In most cases, when we go for programme accreditation, everything is in place.

The institutions know what is required of them and they prepare well in advance

for that. They have dedicated quality assurance units to run the whole processes.

In addition, IQA units at higher education institutions were created to meet the requirements of some of the EQA bodies. For example, the Quality Assurance System for Higher Education in Namibia (2009) stipulated: “Institutions are required to establish internal mechanisms for ensuring and enhancing programme quality.”

These IQA improvement mechanisms contributed to increased trust among students, parents, and the industry.

Sub-sub-theme 3.1.3: Increased Stakeholder Trust. When asked about the effects of EQA on higher education institutions, the following was commented: “... you can be sure that prospective students can look at the university and know this programme is NQA accredited, it's NCHE accredited ... I don't want to use these words, but that it's not just an overnight type of institution.” (Mary, Programme Coordinator) Denise, another Programme Coordinator, remarked:

It gives the parents and also the industry just a bit more comfort in the programme.

What I also noticed is that our parents will enrol students when they know that you are accredited by the professional bodies ... and I think students also notice that there's someone external that looks at the programmes' quality.

Hence, accreditation conducted by the EQA bodies helps to assure the public that institutions offer programmes of an acceptable quality, because it creates trust among stakeholders and offer them a sense of security about the status of an institution.

The following sub-theme presents the findings about the negative effects of EQA on higher education institutions.

Sub-theme 3.2: Negative Effects

In analysing the responses to the question on the effects of EQA on higher education institutions, some negative effects, i.e. demands of accreditation, emotional impact on academics, difficulties with review panels, and decreased trust in accreditation outcomes, were identified as sub-sub-themes under this sub-theme and are presented in the next section.

Sub-sub-theme 3.2.1: Demands of Accreditation. It was found that accreditation by multiple bodies was demanding in the sense that it is time-consuming, puts a lot of pressure on academics, leads to increased workloads for academics, and interferes with teaching duties. Simon, acting Associate Dean for Teaching and Learning, argued as follows:

This is a stressful process ... that takes a huge amount of time and that puts the people who are involved in the process under a huge amount of pressure. People start running around during that time when they are anticipating a visit, and it impacts them negatively in terms of their workload ... but I think the perception is that it's putting a burden on institutions because of the duplication.

In support of this view, one HoD, Alina, replied:

... there is this perception that we are constantly running around accrediting ourselves (laughing) ... It can also be a bit cumbersome, especially when the activities are ongoing. So, you're constantly spending a lot of man hours and investing a lot of admin time on all these processes. It takes its toll on our workloads as well. One would be unable to even attend classes during that time, and sometimes you have to cancel classes to compile reports, to have meetings ...

Aletta, a QA and Accreditation Officer, agreed with these perceptions. She said that "... it can become a headache to the institution, because they have to do the same thing over and over again with different people or different agencies ... it's cumbersome. It's creating fatigue among the institutions".

The findings further revealed that the duplication of efforts is costly because institutions need to contribute towards the expenses incurred for accreditation. Eon, a Programme Coordinator, reasoned: "... you end up flying people in from all across the world and it's a hugely expensive process". In addition, it came to light that the EQA bodies have different accreditation periods, and this often cause delays in rolling out new programmes. Mary, another Programme Coordinator, remarked: "I think, collectively, it would lead to a better outcome, because now you might have NCHE's outcome and their comments and you might have HPCNA's comments a

year later and NQA's three years later ..." while Sheila, an HoD, said: "I feel like there's usually some sort of delay if you have NQA separate and then you have NCHE separate ... delay in terms of introducing the programme, getting the programme into the market."

The demands of accreditation had emotional repercussions on academics, which is presented in the following section.

Sub-sub-theme 3.2.3: Emotional Impact on Academics. The academics often experience feelings of distress or frustration before, during, and after accreditation visits or inspections conducted by more than one EQA body. In response to this question, Liina, one of the QA and Accreditation officers, noted: "I think ... it's really frustrating if you look at the institutions ... because there's now three bodies that are coming to do almost the same thing." Some academics also expressed feelings of insecurity and fear when it is time for accreditation. For example, a Programme Coordinator, Mary, explained:

I think the worst is the unknown ... you don't know who is coming and then there is a sort of fear that's installed in you. So, it's a little bit painful when you, the next year, have to go through the same process again because now it's a new body that needs to accredit you.

Peter, HoD, supported this finding as he remarked: "... that's always a very intense moment (laughing quietly)".

One of the contributing factors of the emotional impact that accreditation has on academics is difficulties they experience with review panels. The subsequent section presents the findings on this aspect.

Sub-sub-theme 3.2.2: Difficulties with Review Panels. Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed some difficulties that the higher education institutions encounter with some of

the review panel members appointed by the EQA bodies. Some interviewees mentioned cases where panel members want to force their own ideas or institutional practices in their countries of origin on the higher education institutions, panel members who are not familiar with local practices/systems, and panel members who portray a tendency of biasness towards them. The following was commented by Denver, Associate Dean for Teaching and Learning:

But the bad thing is that during the process of trying to meet these accreditation criteria, they are imposing advanced economies' mandate into lower economies' mandates. So, they are forcing you to meet their own requirements, sometimes with a very bitter pill.

Avukile, one of the HoDs, in support of this view, replied: "... they tend to streamline things in the way that they do in their own institutions".

The findings further revealed that it is not only the academics who experience difficulties with panel members, but the EQA bodies too. An interesting observation about panel bias was contributed by one of the QA and Accreditation officers, Aletta, who said:

Some of them come with their own biased opinions, especially those from other regions. They want the institutions to do things according to how they do it in their countries, and the environment or circumstances are not the same, especially reviewers who are not from the SADC region.

The findings also revealed that panel bias could have a detrimental effect on the outcome of the accreditation if the EQA body does not intervene, as Aletta went on to say:

But if the whole panel is biased, even though the programme might be doing relatively well, they actually might not pass the programme because of their biased

opinion, but we, as ... QA experts, also try to assist them or inform them to put their feelings aside and look at things from our own context.

Furthermore, two academics expressed concern about subject experts who seem to lack the required expertise in the field of study that could jeopardise the outcome of the accreditation.

Simon, acting Associate Dean for Teaching and Learning, explained:

... we did experience some challenges with expertise in terms of subject matter experts, where we don't really get subject matter experts that are matching the programme that we are developing. The recommendations that they give are not really in line with what we have in our field.

In support of this view, Alina, HoD, commented:

... like one of the accreditations we went through last year, I think maybe only one person was from the field and that also was a problem ... it plays a role in the perception that the panel has regarding the programmes because they come from their own fields and they expect things to be done the way they do it in their own fields, and that places the programme in a negative light, because there's lack of understanding.

Difficulties with review panels cause a lack of trust in the accreditation outcomes among the academics. Findings on this issue are presented in the next section.

Sub-sub-theme 3.2.4: Decreased Trust in Accreditation Outcomes. Some salient findings contributing to a lack of trust among the academics included conflicting accreditation outcomes, where EQA bodies' feedback are in contradiction with each other and so cause confusion for the institutions. This subsequently culminates in a lack of trust in the accreditation outcomes. Liina, QA and Accreditation Officer, explained:

... HPCNA could go and do an inspection or accreditation and then find that institution not to be conducive, and they do not recommend it for training. Then, NQA or NCHE goes and then they approve that facility for training. So, it can cause a lot of confusion, because we are looking at the same thing with different eyes.

Another participant, Simon, acting Associate Dean for Teaching and Learning, responded: "... one institution is satisfied, and the other institution looks at exactly the same information, and is dissatisfied ... it makes it difficult for higher education institutions to know how best to respond to that situation, where there is such a disharmony". It was clear that some staff from the EQA bodies were also concerned about the desynchronisation of the EQA bodies' programme accreditation processes because it leaves room for higher education institutions to doubt the quality of the accreditation conducted by these bodies. Nancy, QA and Accreditation Officer, argued:

I think it's creating a collision, because of trusting the functions of the institutions ... sometimes they question how we do our quality assurance, because if the other institution gave them a go-ahead and you come and you don't give a go-ahead, they will question how you are looking at the quality from different perspectives.

In summary, these results show that the overlapping functions of the EQA bodies have both a positive and a negative impact on the higher education institutions, where the negatives or drawbacks clearly outweigh the positives.

Related to the effects of the overlapping programme accreditation functions on higher education institutions are benefits and challenges. Like the first two main research questions, the third research question had sub-questions to establish what possible benefits and challenges the overlapping accreditation functions hold for higher education institutions. The benefits are associated with the positive effects and the challenges are related to the negative effects.

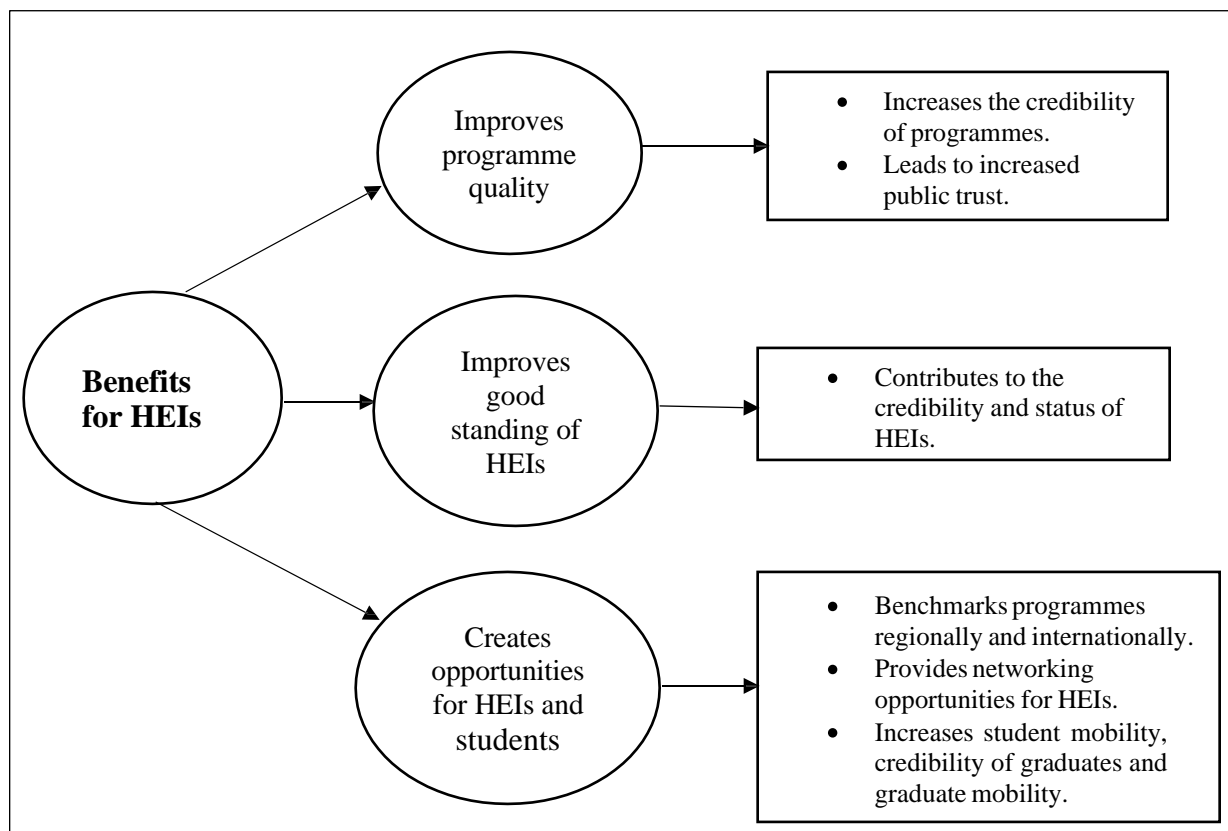
Concerning the benefits, it was only the participants from the EQA bodies who were asked to comment on the benefits for higher education institutions when their respective Agency/Council conducts programme accreditation/validation at the institutions. However, the data analysis also revealed benefits mentioned by the academics. Subsequently, a fourth theme was identified. The findings related to the benefits of programme accreditation are presented in the next section.

Theme 4: Benefits of Programme Accreditation

Theme four was based on the third research question that tried to establish the effects of the overlapping functions on Namibia's higher education institutions, and one sub-theme was identified under this theme, namely benefits for higher education institutions as presented in Figure 11.

Figure 11

Benefits of Programme Accreditation



Under this sub-theme, three sub-sub-themes were identified, i.e. improves programme quality, improves good standing of institutions, and creates opportunities for institutions and students. The findings in relation to this sub-theme are presented in the following sections.

Sub-sub-theme 4.1.1: Improves Programme Quality. From the perspective of some of the QA and Accreditation officers, one of the benefits was that programme accreditation or EQA ensures that an institution's programmes are of an acceptable standard hence it increases the credibility of the programmes. Beauty remarked: "I think for the educational institution, accreditation or approval of the programme should be a huge thing, because it gives the students even surety that they are following an approved programme." while Aletta commented: "... the main benefit is having confidence that the institution is indeed offering quality programmes that have been certified by the external quality assurance agencies". Accredited programmes also instil that trust factor in the public that institutions indeed offer quality assured programmes. In addition, the document analysis revealed that "the overarching aim of the programme accreditation system is to contribute towards safeguarding the quality of academic programmes..." (QA System for Higher Education in Namibia). If an institution ensures that it offers quality assured programmes, it will increase its credibility among its stakeholders. The next section elaborates on this finding.

Sub-sub-theme 4.1.2: Improves Good Standing of Institutions. The findings revealed that accredited programmes contribute to the integrity and status of higher education institutions, not only locally, but regionally and globally as well. Precious, one of the QA and Accreditation officers, commented: "They give that morale to the institutions and enhance the reputation of the institution, nationally, regionally and internationally." From the point of view of an academic, who expressed the same opinion as the QA and Accreditation Officer, the following was commented:

“... in the longer run, it is to do with your reputation within your own country, within the region and internationally.” (Eon, Programme Coordinator)

A positive university status could improve the chances for the institution and the students to benefit from various opportunities. The next section presents the findings on this aspect.

Sub-sub-theme 4.1.3: Creates Opportunities for Institutions and Students. The findings revealed that the EQA bodies normally appoint subject and QA experts from outside the country that provides an opportunity to higher education institutions to benchmark their operations with peer institutions. Eon explained: “In terms of international benchmarking ... they have to have ... professionals from the country where the validation is taking place as well as ... regional and international professionals and academics.” Liina, QA and Accreditation Officer, commented:

In cases where the profession does not have the capacity, we look for inspectors outside the country. We use mostly actually South Africa. We have also, in the past, used Botswana. We have used Zimbabwe, just to come and assist us in that inspection or accreditation process.

It also came to light that the programme accreditation exercises conducted by the EQA bodies, provide networking opportunities to institutions, as explained by Aletta, a QA and Accreditation Officer:

It's also a networking opportunity, so that should they need to review the programme next time, they can rely on their peers or call their peers, because they always exchange numbers at the end of the reviews, and they keep in touch.

Moreover, benefits for students included increased student mobility, credibility of graduates, and graduate employability. Precious, QA and Accreditation Officer, responded: “If you studied at an accredited institution, you can further your studies at other accredited institutions.

The employers will know that you went through a process or qualifications that were quality assured.” Another response was as follows: “Accredited programmes provide formal recognition by peers ... across the country. Graduates gain greater access to ... other universities, nationally and internationally.” (Jasper, Programme Coordinator) Still on the point of graduate employability, according to the QA System for Higher Education in Namibia (2009), “the overarching aim of the programme accreditation system is to contribute towards ... facilitating the employability of ... graduates”.

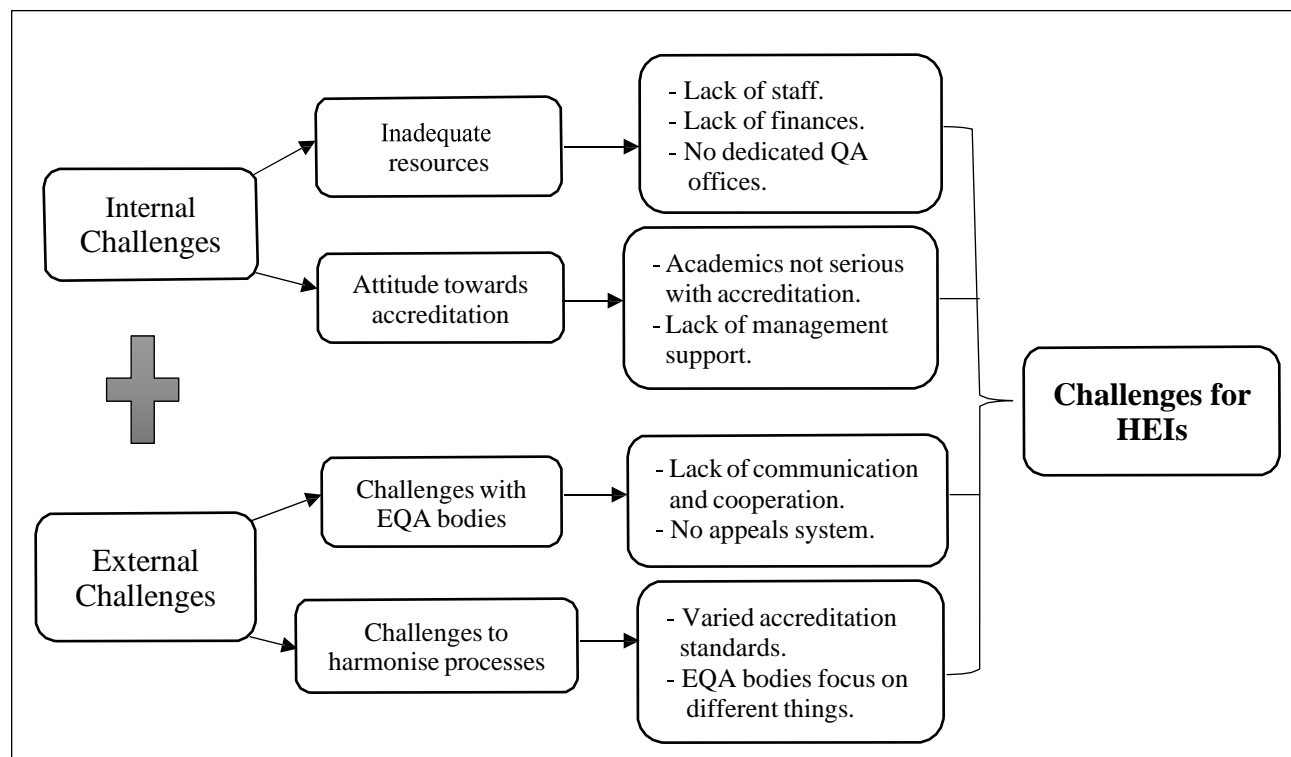
The next section presents the findings related to the challenges of programme accreditation.

Theme 5: Challenges for Higher Education Institutions

With regards to the challenges, two slightly different questions were posed to the two sample groups. The participants from the higher education institutions were asked: “What are the challenges for higher education institutions associated with external programme accreditation?” And the participants from the EQA bodies were asked: “Can you comment on the challenges higher education institutions encounter when your Agency/Council conducts programme accreditation/validation at these institutions?” Two sub-themes were identified under this theme, i.e. internal and external challenges. Figure 12 provides a snapshot of the challenges experienced by higher education institutions during accreditation.

Figure 12

Challenges Experienced by Higher Education Institutions during Programme Accreditation



A detailed presentation of the findings on the internal and external challenges are provided in the following sections.

Sub-theme 5.1: Internal Challenges

In terms of the internal challenges that higher education institutions experience, two sub-sub-themes, i.e. inadequate resources, and attitude towards accreditation, were identified. The findings in relation to this sub-theme are presented in the subsequent sections.

Sub-sub-theme 5.1.1: Inadequate Resources. The findings revealed that higher education institutions have inadequate human and financial resources and consequently, they are not able to meet the QA requirements of all these bodies. Tuyeni, a QA and Accreditation Officer, remarked: “There are challenges with limited human resources ... sometimes they don't have

enough money to buy the required equipment ...” Another QA and Accreditation Officer, Liina, supported this comment and explained:

It does have an impact because there are specific areas that they look at. For instance, if the programme is not being supported financially and there is no library ... there is no equipment, then it has an impact on the outcome of the inspection or the accreditation.

The higher education institutions constantly must prepare for programme accreditation, and this puts a strain on their budgets, because they must ensure that reparations are done in time and that the infrastructure is always in a good condition. Denver, Associate Dean for Teaching and Learning, commented: “Within the process, you are overstretching the bits ... just ... to meet their ... requirements.” while Doreen, acting Associate Dean for Teaching and Learning, rather frustratingly responded:

We know that things are not regularly maintained by the unit that's supposed to do that. So, you need to put in orders that ... things get serviced. You need to make sure that the venues are up to standard ... There's always no money to do this, but there's always money to do other things.

In addition, it came to light that some institutions do not have dedicated QA offices to drive programme accreditation processes, and if such offices exist, they are not adequately staffed.

Sandra, QA and Accreditation Officer, replied:

... if you look at the private higher education institutions, another challenge that I can highlight there is maybe lack of manpower. You find that the head of the institution is at the same time the quality assurance director or the quality assurance officer ...

In support of this view, Simon, acting Associate Dean for Teaching and Learning, replied:

... one of the challenges has been that, especially for the private institutions, for some time, they were operating without a person who is dedicated to quality assurance. But if you look at the scope of the programmes that public institutions offer as well ... they are quite huge compared to the human resources we have in the quality assurance offices.

The document analysis further revealed that "... quality assurance systems are unevenly spread between institutions. The same also applies within institutions: in some areas efficient quality assurance systems are in operation, whereas in others, quality assurance systems are underdeveloped or not yet developed." (QA System for Higher Education in Namibia, 2009)

The attitude of staff at higher education institutions towards programme accreditation is another challenge highlighted by participants. The findings on this issue are presented in the next section.

Sub-sub-theme 5.1.2: Attitude towards Accreditation. One of the participants expressed concern about academics who are not serious and take accreditation for granted, and that they could sometimes paint a picture that is not a true reflection of what is happening on the ground. Simon, acting Associate Dean for Teaching and Learning, responded:

It's only human nature that if you are being observed, you pay more attention to what is being observed, and people modify their behaviour. So, in most cases, when the process is done, people just say: 'Ooh, we are done with the process', and they think it's now time to relax ... instead of building on the lessons that they have learned.

Lack of support from management that could jeopardise the departments' efforts to meet accreditation requirements or implement the accreditation recommendations is another grave concern raised by some participants. One of the QA and Accreditation officers, Liina, remarked: "We, sometimes, get to an institution that has challenges ... they are not being supported in executing their mandates as far as the programmes are concerned. I think that's the main challenge ... institutions are not supported by higher management ..." Denver, Associate Dean for Teaching and Learning, who seemed to be quite frustrated about this issue, said:

... it seems as if the recommendations that came ... from NCHE ... during their previous visit ... have not yet been addressed ... As I have said, it will come to haunt us again, because when they come they will say it was one of the concerns ... that we promised ... we are going to sort out. **But where are we now? Where are we now?** Are we going to expect any positive feedback when they come back? **No!**

The following section presents the findings on the external challenges.

Sub-theme 5.2: External Challenges

Two sub-sub-themes, i.e. challenges with EQA bodies and challenges to harmonise processes, were identified. The findings in relation to this sub-theme are presented in the ensuing sections.

Sub-sub-theme 5.2.1: Challenges with EQA Bodies. When participants were asked about the challenges of EQA for higher education institutions, the findings revealed a lack of communication between EQA bodies and higher education institutions, and a lack of cooperation between the EQA bodies that contribute further to the existing duplication of functions. Denver, Associate Dean for Teaching and Learning, commented:

People have perceptions because you don't reach out. So, to me, the perception of overlap is there because ... they've never even gone out there to explain who they are. The only time we hear their voices is when it is time for revision of programmes. That is not supposed to be the case.

The findings revealed that the EQAAs do not make time to create awareness among or educate the institutions about their individual functions. Tuyeni, one of the QA and Accreditation officers, explained: “Sometimes, the NQA and NCHE don't ... make time to educate the institutions. It ... became a serious concern ... roadshows are not organised that much to educate institutions.”

It further came to light that usual collaborations between EQA bodies came to an end for some reasons not mentioned, and that these bodies reverted to doing their own thing again. One of the QA and Accreditation officers, Aletta, noted that “in the past, when NCHE was conducting programme accreditation, they would invite the officers from the [NQA] Accreditation Department to assist them ... but two-three years ago, [she] did not see any collaboration between the two entities concerning this”. Scenarios where the EQA bodies seem to work on islands or in their own little corners were mentioned. One of the participants remarked: “... at the present moment, that situation of having multiple bodies create silos where this body works independently. They do not even know whether what they are talking about has been addressed, and if the other institution was satisfied.” (Simon, acting Associate Dean: Teaching and Learning)

Furthermore, a salient observation that was made involved the absence of an appeals system that prevents institutions to object to an accreditation outcome. Aletta, QA and Accreditation Officer, explained: “Like for the NCHE ... there is no appeals system in place. So, now let's say, NCHE fails them, NQA passes them, they cannot appeal. So, it's also another frustrating thing for the institutions.”

The participants also highlighted some challenges they feel could complicate efforts to streamline the programme accreditation systems and processes of the EQA bodies. The results concerning this issue are presented in the next section.

Sub-sub-theme 5.2.2: Challenges to Harmonise Processes. Although the participants felt that the accreditation processes should be harmonised, some of them noted that streamlining thereof could be difficult, because each EQA body just acts according to the powers assigned to them through their respective Acts of Parliament, hence nothing binds them to agree to harmonise their systems. It would be a composite process, as the accreditation standards and guidelines vary, and the bodies focus on different things. Sandra, QA and Accreditation Officer, explained as follows:

On the ground we see that it's not working, and we can harmonise the systems, but also on the other end, the Acts are there. We cannot work against the laws that have created these institutions. That's my personal opinion because when you want to harmonise the systems, other institutions can say that they are mandated by their Act to do what they are doing now ...

Eon, Programme Coordinator, and Peter, HoD, respectively commented:

... we got a QA team together with the National Council for Higher Education ... so that we could talk about simplifying the process. But it is a lot more complex than it looks at first, you know, at face value. When I studied their rules and guidelines, I realised that it won't work.

... we have discussed this ... to have a joint panel between NCHE and the professional bodies and it simply would not make any sense, because the basis of the evaluation is so different from what I understand about the requirements of the

NCHE ... And, of course, that is practically not always possible, because programmes are developed at different times and the rhythms are different.

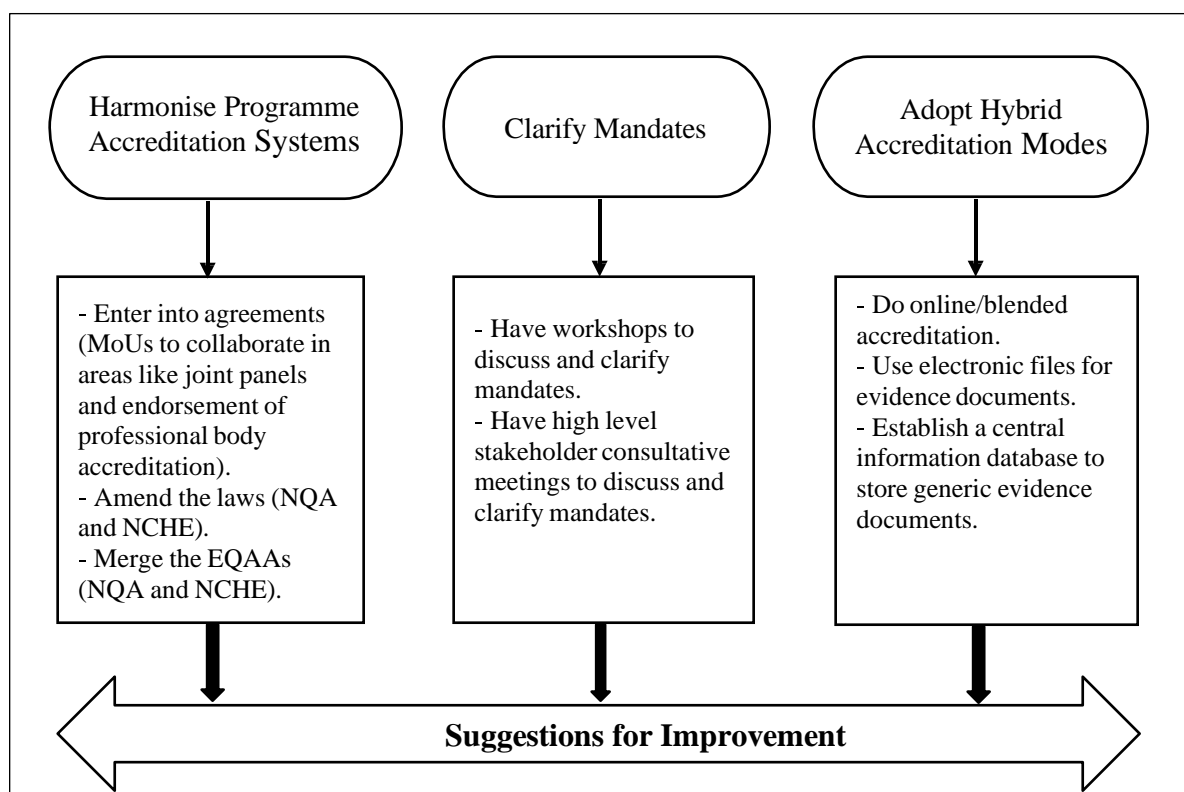
Theme six, entitled ‘Suggestions for Improvement’, is the final theme that was identified through the thematic analysis of the responses gathered on the last research question in both interview guides, i.e.: “Do you have any suggestions/advice on what could be done to streamline the programme accreditation processes of the various external quality assurance bodies?” The key findings of this question are presented below.

Theme 6: Suggestions for Improvement

The following three sub-themes were identified under this theme: harmonise programme accreditation systems, clarify mandates, and adopt hybrid accreditation modes. The suggestions for improvement are summarised in Figure 13 followed by a detailed discussion in the ensuing sections.

Figure 13

Suggestions for Improvement



Sub-theme 6.1: Harmonise Programme Accreditation Systems

Three sub-sub-themes were identified under this sub-theme, namely enter into agreements, amend the laws, and merge the EQAAs.

Sub-sub-theme 6.1.1: Enter into Agreements. There was consensus among the participants to streamline the programme accreditation processes by entering into agreements. This called for cooperation and collaboration in different areas through MoUs. According to the interviewees, areas of collaboration should include joint panel inspections and endorsement of accreditation outcomes given by professional bodies. Streamlining the accreditation processes in these ways would be easier and less demanding, cost-effective, and increase efficiency. The extracts below show the responses of participants regarding the suggestion to enter into agreements:

... there can be a memorandum of understanding ... where the Health Professional Council will then give ... their findings to the other body ... for them then not to go again to the institution, because the institution was already visited by a mandated body, which gave them a report on what they found ... (Precious, QA and Accreditation Officer)

It would be so much nicer if they were combined to say, every two or three years, everyone is going to sit around the table, and we are going to accredit your programme instead of having it fragmented and redoing the process. And, I think, collectively, it would lead to a better outcome ... (Mary, Programme Coordinator)

... I think harmonisation is very important in our case ... looking at the time we spend to do programme accreditation, the efforts put in, the resources put in. We

can save on costs involving experts. We can save on time. We can save on efforts made to look at the programmes. (Sandra, QA and Accreditation Officer)

In addition, the findings revealed that there are existing MoUs between the NCHE and the other EQA bodies (NCHE and NQA, NCHE and HPCNA, and NCHE and ECN) to streamline their QA processes and collaborate in different areas, e.g., programme accreditation. Avukile, one of the HoDs, remarked: “Now that there is an MoU between NCHE and NQA, there could be more MOUs going beyond that with the professional bodies or the programme that needs them.” One of the QA and Accreditation officers, Sandra, commented:

We have MoUs with both the Health Professions Council and the Engineering Council of Namibia ... we are looking at areas where we can collaborate or cooperate. For example, like programme accreditation is one area with the Health Professions Council. So, we usually invite a member of these professional bodies to be part of our panels ...

Aletta, QA and Accreditation Officer, confirmed that the “NCHE also entered into MoUs with NQA to try and streamline the processes”, yet she was not so convinced that signing MoUs is adequate because it seemed to contribute to the power struggle between the bodies, as mentioned earlier. She continued to say:

... various EQAAs tried to enter into MoUs to try and streamline their processes. However, I don't think that is adequate or enough ... sometimes the MoUs don't work and when you are trying to work together, the other institutions want to be on top and boss the other one, and the other one wants to be more powerful.

Sub-sub-theme 6.1.2: Amend the Laws. The findings revealed a strong feeling among some of the QA and Accreditation officers that the existing Parliamentary Acts of the NQA and

the NCHE should be amended to split the programme accreditation and NQF functions between the two regulatory bodies. The rationale for this suggestion was that amendment of the legislations would reduce the overlapping functions and save costs. Aletta commented:

... for NCHE and NQA, there is need for their governing laws to be changed, because there is a lot of duplication. I would advise the NQA and the NCHE, especially those two ... so that, in the end, duplications can be eliminated, and the government also saves money, because now, it's a waste of resources.

Another response was as follows:

I think the best way is to merge the functions of the NCHE and the NQA to be done by one body. Each one is having its mandate, their Act, but I think the best way will then be to amend the two Acts, so that one body is responsible for accreditation and the other one will take over the other functions, like the registration of the qualifications on the NQF ... (Precious)

An interesting revelation was made through the interviews, i.e. that the NCHE has already made several attempts to amend the Higher Education Act 26 of 2003 to streamline the programme accreditation functions. Efforts to amend some other Acts were apparently also made. Sandra, QA and Accreditation Officer, commented as follows:

Several attempts were made to amend the Higher Education Act and also the other Acts. Ever since I started here, we were informed that they are in the process of amending the Higher Education Act, and so far, we did not get any feedback.

However, it seemed that the proposed amendments might not be directed towards streamlining the accreditation functions per se, as Sandra continued to explain: "I've seen recently some

amendments. It's really not a major thing, but attempts were made to amend the Act and nothing positive came through. So, really, attempts were made to amend the Acts."

Sub-sub-theme 6.1.3: Merge the EQAAs. An interesting observation that was made suggested that the NQA and the NCHE should merge; however, the professional bodies were to remain with their functions. Merging the two EQAAs would reduce the duplications, be more cost-effective and contribute to better keep track and follow-up on programme accreditation related activities with the institutions. Tuyeni, one of the QA and Accreditation officers, responded as follows:

They need to be merged to become maybe one institution ... to avoid the duplications. Both NQA and NCHE ... are fully funded by the Ministry of Education. If it was one body, I think that would save money. Imagine now, you are funding two institutions to go and duplicate functions.

In concurrence with Tuyeni, Sheila, HoD, remarked:

I would think that it would be best if there's only one body that will be responsible for it, and then they probably have like various departments ... once it's done here at this specific department, it goes to the next department. You can monitor it better when it's in the same organisation ...

One body would also reduce conflicting accreditation outcomes, as explained by Nancy, QA and Accreditation Officer: "So, if everything is harmonised and come from one body, I think it will work better, then you will not have like, NCHE is saying this ... NQA is saying this."

Professional bodies ought not to be part of the merger but could collaborate with the EQAAs through MoUs. According to Aletta, QA and Accreditation Officer, "... the professional bodies can continue as they are and just enter into MoUs with the NCHE or NQA, so that they do

things together ...” and Mbongi, one of the HoDs, said: “Professional bodies should take centre stage. They should be the ones in the forefront.” These findings clearly show that the professional bodies play a significant role in assuring the quality of programmes and as such, they should continue with their functions.

Sub-theme 6.2: Clarify Mandates

One of the suggestions was that the EQA bodies should make concerted efforts to elucidate their roles and functions so that higher education institutions clearly understand what each body is mandated to do. This could be done through workshops or high-level meetings between key stakeholders in higher education. Clear mandates would reduce the overlaps and lead to increased efficiency. Mbongi commented:

I think they need to have a workshop themselves, NCHE, NQA ... the Minister of Education, the Executive Director, the other ministers from various ministries and so forth ... then they establish the particular roles which should be done by each and every one. Then, this should come out as a policy with the Parliament, then things won't overlap. Things will work. Things will make sense.

Beauty, QA and Accreditation Officer, was of the same thinking when she said:

Maybe, there should be a document that specifies a specific task so that we avoid the overlapping ... I think if your tasks are specific, you tend to focus more on what you're supposed to do than venturing into other activities which may not be part of what you're supposed to do.

Another suggestion was:

Or keep the agencies as they are, but with separate clearly stipulated functions. If NCHE is responsible for programme accreditation, they focus on that, if NQA is

just responsible for the NQF, they focus on that, so that these other overlaps can be eliminated, and every institution or agency focuses on what they are mandated to do. (Aletta, QA and Accreditation Officer)

Sub-theme 6.3: Adopt Hybrid Accreditation Modes

The findings also revealed suggestions made by some of the programme coordinators that relate to hybrid/blended accreditation modes or online accreditation, as it would be economical and less time-consuming. Jasper commented: “To improve the accreditation processes of the various external quality assurance bodies, I suggest that QA audits be made available online.” while Eon explained: “... I think if all of the accreditation bodies would agree to the format of a visit, being not just face-to-face, but also in a hybrid format, the visits will be shorter and ... cheaper.” Electronic files can be prepared that will be less cumbersome, cut costs and save time. Doreen, Associate Dean for Teaching and Learning, commented:

I think what we need to do is to make sure that we rather, instead of having all these files, where you had to print stuff, we need to go digital with this. That is what COVID taught us now, go digital, and it will save us a lot of time. It's much quicker and easier to compile something digitally than it is to compile something paper-based, because if you don't have a printer, you need to go through the requisition process. If you don't have money, you can't buy it.

This could then facilitate the establishment of a central database to the benefit of higher education institutions and the EQA bodies. Simon, acting Associate Dean for Teaching and Learning, responded: “If it is relevant for the functions of the other body, my take is that this is information that can be kept centrally and then it can be shared by the other stakeholders.”

The findings further revealed that COVID-19 compelled the NCHE to introduce blended accreditation, which turned out to be a good cost-saving measure as well. Aletta, QA and Accreditation Officer, explained:

In the past, we would fly in these experts to come and review the programmes in person, but because of COVID, we do it online or virtually. With the virtual accreditation, NCHE's staff members, accompanied by the industry experts, go to the institutions to view the facilities ... [while] ... the institutions video record the facilities and after that, the NCHE ... creates a link that is shared with the panel members to view the different facilities. Previously, the institutions would file the evidence documents ... and the panel would find these on site. But virtually, we'll create a link and share it with the panel members.

The evaluation of the research findings is discussed in the next section.

Evaluation of Findings

This section presents an evaluation and discussion of the research findings in line with the literature reviewed and the conceptual frameworks adopted. The latter included the Conceptual Model of Quality (Schindler et al., 2015) and the Deming Plan-Do-Check-Act Quality Cycle, which is increasingly used to improve the effectiveness of IQA and EQA systems in higher education (Asif & Raouf, 2013; Chen, 2012; Eby, 2019; Goubitz, 2011; Maruyama & Inoue, 2016; Mergen et al., 2014; Noda et al., 2018; Shokraiefard, 2011).

Firstly, the Conceptual Model of Quality served a fourfold purpose in this study. It aided in establishing: (1) the purpose and mandates of each of the EQA bodies and whether they acted within their mandates (quality as purposeful); (2) the ways in which the overlapping functions impacted higher education institutions (quality as transformative); (3) if higher education

institutions can meet the standards of all EQA bodies provided the status quo (quality as exceptional); and (4) if the institutions could be held accountable to deliver quality education if they have to adhere to the QA standards of multiple EQA bodies (quality as accountable).

Secondly, this study proposed a plan of action (see section on Recommendations for Application in Chapter 5) to assist relevant authorities and the EQA bodies to streamline their functions pertaining to programme accreditation. The suggested plan of action is based on what the researcher calls ‘The PDCA Quality Conceptual Model’ which is a combination of the Deming PDCA Cycle and the Conceptual Model of Quality (see Figure 4 in Chapter 2).

Research Question 1: What functions are the NCHE, NQA, HPCNA, and ECN mandated to undertake as per their respective legislations?

Findings from the semi-structured individual interviews and the document analysis answered this research question. These findings are discussed in view of the concept of quality as purposeful (fitness for purpose), which denotes that the mandate and purpose of each EQA body should be clear to allow them to perform their functions with ease in accordance with their mandates (Gover & Loukkola, 2018).

Functions of the NQA

The study revealed that the NQA is mainly responsible for functions related to the NQF, but it is also charged with accreditation. In terms of accreditation, it was clear that the NQA conducts institutional accreditation rather than programme accreditation. The functions of the NQA are consistent with Castel-Branco’s (2022) findings that national qualifications authorities are typically responsible for the NQF and the accreditation of institutions or providers of education and training.

Functions of the NCHE

It emerged without a doubt that the NCHE is mandated by law to conduct programme accreditation at higher education institutions (Higher Education Act, 2003) like many other councils/commissions for higher education (Garwe, 2014; McCurry, 2018; ZimCHE, 2018). The NCHE is regarded as the regulator of higher education and as such responsible to conduct comprehensive and in-depth accreditation of the programmes offered by higher education institutions on a cyclical basis (Ibrahim, 2014; McCurry, 2018).

Functions of the Professional Bodies

It was found that the laws of the HPCNA and the ECN do not mandate these bodies to conduct programme accreditation (Allied Health Professions Act, 2004; Engineering Profession Amendment Act, 1991) unlike what was revealed by the literature reviewed, i.e. that professional bodies can also conduct programme validation (Ayoo et al., 2020; McCurry, 2018), a concept which is often used interchangeably with programme accreditation (Ibrahim, 2014). The main functions of the HPCNA and the ECN are to evaluate and approve curricula, and register professionals (Allied Health Professions Act, 2004; Engineering Profession Amendment Act, 1991; QAA, 2018). However, the findings revealed that the HPCNA also conducts facility inspections or site visits, which do not form part of its mandate and thus may not portray quality as fitness for purpose (Gover & Loukkola, 2018; Taber et al., 2020). Numerous studies cautioned against such practices, because they inevitably result in an overlap and a duplication of functions (Chalmers, 2008; Friedman et al., 2017; IIEP, 2020a; Imaniriho, 2020; Kis, 2005). In addition, it came to light that the ECN was in the process of amending its Act to add programme accreditation to its functions.

In the next section, the findings concerning the second research question are discussed.

Research Question 2: What are the perceptions and views of the higher education institutions, the EQAAs, and professional bodies as regards the seemingly overlapping functions?

This research question was mainly answered by the findings obtained during the individual interviews. Again, the findings are discussed in view of the notion of quality as purposeful and how the similarities between the programme accreditation functions and processes of the EQA bodies contributed to the overlaps.

Overlapping Roles

The findings revealed a consensus that the programme accreditation functions of the EQA bodies indeed overlap, especially the functions of the NQA and the NCHE. It transpired that the NCHE that came into existence after the NQA was assigned the responsibility of conducting programme accreditation at higher education institutions, while the NQA already fulfilled this function. This causes a duplication of functions performed by the EQAAs, which was also emphasised in Friedman et al.'s study (2017). It also became a concern to the higher education institutions as well as the EQAAs because it seems that there is no clear segregation of the functions assigned to the NQA and the NCHE, a similar situation that the higher education sector faced in Botswana some years back ("BOTA, TEC Merger Long Overdue," 2009). Though, it was reported that the EQAAs do not have a choice and merely act according to the functions assigned to them by their respective Acts of Parliament. Gover and Loukkola (2018), supported by Kis (2005), argued that it is imperative that there is a clear distinction between the purpose and roles of EQA bodies even before they start operating, because it may not be easy to reach consensus on what is expected from or to assign responsibilities to multiple duty-holders if powers are not clearly defined, as pointed out by Chirwa (2014).

It was clear from the findings that the validation of professional or specialised programmes is essential irrespective of the overlaps because the requirements for these programmes are unique (PhillipsKPA, 2017). An interesting observation that emanated from the findings was that multiple EQA bodies may complement each other and increase efficiency; however, this finding is in contradiction with the University World News (2008) that reported that multiple EQA bodies in Botswana caused disintegration and disharmony in the QA processes of these bodies. In support of the latter argument, Hernández-Fernández et al. (2021) claimed that the complementary role that EQA bodies are expected to fulfil often results in the opposite, i.e. a duplication of functions.

Different Focus Points

It emerged from the findings that although the EQA bodies have similar accreditation processes, they have different focus points and niche areas that they are looking at during accreditation, especially professional bodies (PhillipsKPA, 2017). A definite difference was emphasised, e.g., the EQAAs are doing input-based accreditation while the professional bodies are doing output-based validation or accreditation, which distinguishes their approach from that of the EQAAs (Ibrahim, 2014; Qadir, 2020).

Comparable Accreditation Processes

Concerning the accreditation processes followed by the EQA bodies, it was revealed that the procedures employed by the NQA, NCHE and HPCNA are alike. These processes basically include submitting the SER, conducting a site visit, writing the review panel report, and providing the outcome to institutions (Ayoo et al., 2020; Hernández-Fernández et al., 2021). These are the generic processes for programme accreditation followed by EQA bodies worldwide, as stated by Cirlan and Loukkola (2021) and McCurry (2018). However, the participants could not comment much on the accreditation processes of the ECN, as the findings revealed that this body does not

conduct programme accreditation, which is in contradiction with what was reported in existing literature, i.e. that professional bodies conduct programme accreditation (Harvey, 2004-2020; Ibrahim, 2014; McCurry, 2018; QAA, 2018). It was, however, reported in the interviews that the ECN is in the process of amending its legislation to include programme accreditation (Engineering Professions Amendment Bill, 2019).

Comparable Accreditation Standards

It was confirmed that the NQA, NCHE and the HPCNA use similar accreditation criteria, i.e. facilities, infrastructure, finances, staff, IQA, curriculum, aims and objectives, etc. This finding is supported by previous studies that reported about the same general standards and criteria used by other EQA bodies in the accreditation of programmes (IIEP, 2020b; Manimala et al., 2020; Matei & Iwinska, 2016). However, Makhoul (2019) and McCurry (2018) offered a different opinion in that the type of criteria used in an accreditation exercise may differ depending on the type of programme assessed. Again, the findings did not reveal much about the ECN in this regard due to the ECN not being assigned a programme accreditation function.

Competition Among EQA Bodies

The allocation of similar functions to different EQA bodies resulted in a spirit of rivalry between the bodies, especially the NQA and the NCHE. The participants felt that this situation risks the purpose for which these bodies were initially established which is contrary to the concept of quality as purposeful, as described by Morales (2019) and Gover and Loukkola (2018). The intersecting programme accreditation functions seemed to cause confusion and even clashes between the NQA and the NCHE. This finding corroborates with what was reported in a consultancy report on a comprehensive study to review the higher education system in Namibia, which revealed that the overlapping programme accreditation functions between the NCHE and

the NQA could result in “... misunderstandings and possible conflicts ...” (NCHE, 2012, p. 117) between the two EQAAs. These findings are in line with Imaniriho’s (2020) argument that such a phenomenon may create contention between EQA bodies.

The following section evaluates the findings regarding the third research question.

Research Question 3: How do the overlapping functions of the NCHE, NQA, HPCNA, and ECN affect Namibia’s higher education institutions?

Findings from the interviews and some documents analysed answered this research question. The findings are discussed considering the notions of quality as transformative, exceptional, and accountable.

Positive Effects

Increased Staff Motivation. Positive accreditation outcomes encouraged academics to commit themselves to continuously keep track with and implement new advancements in their areas of teaching to ensure a quality education is delivered to students. Additionally, it was reported that institutions would try their utmost best to avail funds to prepare to the best of their ability for accreditation visits to ensure that their programmes are accredited. These findings are consonant with the concept of quality as excellence and quality as accountable (Gover & Loukkola, 2018; Schindler et al., 2015), and were also confirmed by PhillipsKPA (2017) and Liu et al. (2015) who claimed that accreditation visits motivate academics to apply innovative teaching and assessment methods and persuade management to earmark funds for academic support services (Saeed et al., 2015). However, contrasting findings were reported by Istileulova (2018) and Kelchen (2017) about some EQA bodies that are too rigid and prescriptive, which put a damper on the creativity of academics. Increased staff motivation contributed to improved IQA systems in the institutions.

Improved IQA Systems. Accreditation visits by the EQA bodies encouraged higher education institutions to improve internal systems and practices (Ogbeche, 2021; Elken & Stensaker, 2018), e.g., it was reported that one institution improved its examination and moderation system after an accreditation visit, which confirms the excellence factor of the Conceptual Model of Quality (Schindler et al., 2015). The establishment of IQA units at higher education institutions was another direct result of programme accreditation (Albaqami, 2019; Martin, 2018b). On the contrary, numerous studies questioned the value-addition factor of EQA, as it apparently does not have a sufficient improvement-driven effect on the operations of higher education institutions (Beerkens, 2018; Bishoff, 2018; Leiber et al., 2018; Lucander & Christersson, 2020; Nyamwesa et al., 2020; Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018), which is in contrast with the concept of quality as transformative. Improved IQA systems resulted in increased stakeholder trust.

Increased Stakeholder Trust. Findings from the interviews revealed that students, parents, and the industry seem to have increased trust and confidence in the academic offerings of training providers if they know that these institutions' programmes are accredited, as pointed out by Ibrahim (2014) in his study. This finding may imply that higher education institutions can take accountability or responsibility to use available resources to the best of their ability (Schindler et al., 2015; Swanzy & Potts, 2017) to ensure that their programmes achieve accreditation status and are of an acceptable standard (Soomro & Ahmad, 2012).

Negative Effects

Having to meet the requirements of multiple EQA bodies, higher education institutions may find it challenging to uphold the notion of quality as exceptional and accountable (Atibuni, 2020; Kis, 2005), as revealed in the findings.

Demands of Accreditation. Accreditation by multiple EQA bodies was found to be demanding on higher education institutions, because it is time-consuming, puts a lot of burden on academics, causes increased workloads and accreditation fatigue, and interferes with teaching duties, as emphasised in various studies (Atibuni, 2020; Friedman et al., 2017; Garwe, 2019; Huang, 2017; PhillipsKPA, 2017). Kis also stressed that “multiple agencies impose an excessive load on higher education institutions” (2005, p. 14). In addition, huge cost implications for institutions, no alignment between accreditation periods, and delays in implementing programmes were also reported, which confirm the findings in various studies reviewed (Imaniriho, 2020; Killian, 2023; Martin, 2018b; PhillipsKPA, 2017). The findings of this study surprisingly did not reveal negative impacting factors on the research time of academics or infringement on institutional autonomy that were claimed by Friedman et al. (2017) and PhillipsKPA (2017) in the investigations they carried out. Accreditation demands can take its toll on academics.

Emotional Impact on Academics. Site visits by multiple EQA bodies often cause feelings of anxiety and even fear among academics because they do not always know what the accreditation outcome of each body may be. This finding is consistent with the results reported in several studies (Alshamsi et al., 2020; Atibuni, 2020; Matei & Iwinska, 2016; Weir, 2009). Difficulties with review panels seemed to contribute to the poor emotional wellbeing of academics during accreditation.

Difficulties with Review Panels. The findings revealed that some panel members want to impose their ideas or practices that they use in their countries of origin on the higher education institutions, reviewers who are unfamiliar with local practices and reviewers who tend to be biased in determining accreditation outcomes, which confirmed the findings of Atibuni (2020) and PhillipsKPA (2017). In addition, Torre and Zapata also reported “... lack of rigor in the

accreditation decisions and conflicts of interest” (2013, pp. 11-12). Furthermore, concern was raised about panel members who seem to lack expertise in certain fields of study which could put the accreditation outcome at risk. Atibuni (2020) pointed out that review panel members in Africa often lack expertise in the field of study of programmes submitted for accreditation. This led to decreased trust in accreditation outcomes.

Decreased Trust in Accreditation Outcomes. Participants mentioned the possibility of contradicting accreditation outcomes that could cause higher education institutions to lose trust in the credibility of the EQA processes applied by these bodies. In a report on the first conference on QA in higher education in Namibia, emphasis was put on uncoordinated programme accreditation practices that may lessen the “credibility in the accreditation if the outcomes are different ...” (NCHE, 2019a, p. 21). This view is supported in a study conducted by Garwe (2019) where similar occurrences were observed.

As sub-questions under the third research question, the interviewees were asked to highlight the benefits (participants from EQA bodies) and challenges (participants from EQA bodies and higher education institutions) of programme accreditation for higher education institutions.

Benefits of Programme Accreditation

The findings revealed that EQA improves the quality of programmes and the credibility of institutions thereby ensuring public trust and confidence in the academic offerings and services of higher education institutions. It also creates benchmarking and networking opportunities for the institutions, and increases student mobility, the credibility of graduates and graduate employability. These findings are consistent with the results of various studies reviewed (Atibuni,

2020; Berse, 2018; Bishoff, 2018; Dicker et al., 2018; Friedman et al., 2017; PhillipsKPA, 2017; Simukungwe, 2018).

Internal Challenges

Inadequate Resources. A shortage of human and financial resources often impedes the higher education institutions' efforts to meet the accreditation requirements of the EQA bodies and causes a level of frustration among academics. In his study, Friedman et al. reported that "... HEI personnel have ... noted the dual demands of accreditation ... as a duplication of resource demands" (2017, p. 8). Literature reviewed confirmed that the financial and administrative requirements of accreditation as well as the efforts of institutions to pass accreditation put a strain on institutional resources (Friedman et al., 2017; Kelchen, 2017; Leiber et al., 2018; PhillipsKPA, 2017). The findings also revealed a lack of and/or poorly resourced IQA offices in higher education institutions. This finding is in agreement with Nyamwesa et al. (2020) who argued that it seems not a priority for institutions in Africa to upgrade the skills of QA staff, and according to Atibuni (2020) and Swanzy et al. (2018), QA staff are often overworked and sometimes do not have dedicated office space to efficiently perform their duties.

Attitude Towards Accreditation. A concern that emerged from the findings is that it seems that some academics do not see the value in programme accreditation and their efforts may tend to be little more than window dressing. Martin (2016) cautioned that academics may see EQA as a mere compliance check than an enhancement-driven activity just so to decrease interference with their teaching schedules. Also, Mahmoodian et al. (2016) found that EQA processes may demotivate academics to give their full cooperation because of increased workloads. Lack of support from management is another challenge that academics encounter to meet accreditation requirements. One of the QA and Accreditation officers, Liina, remarked: "We, sometimes, get to

an institution that has challenges ... they are not being supported in executing their mandates as far as the programmes are concerned. I think that's the main challenge ... institutions are not supported by higher management ...” One study revealed that universities in Africa experience poor leadership and management skills and misuse of institutional funds, which may constrain efforts to satisfy accreditation conditions (Afolabi & Idowu, 2019).

External Challenges

Challenges with EQA Bodies. The challenges that emerged from satisfying the accreditation demands of more than one EQA body evaluated the accountability and ability of higher education institutions to satisfy the needs and expectations of students, according to the Conceptual Model of Quality (Schindler et al., 2015). A lack of communication between EQA bodies and higher education institutions, and a lack of collaboration between the EQA bodies were reported by the participants. Higher education institutions were not happy that there is hardly any engagement between them and the EQA bodies except when it is time for programme accreditation. The EQA bodies do not set aside time to sensitise institutions on their QA mandates and systems. McCurry (2018) and Friedman et al. (2017) reported about ineffective communication between EQA bodies and higher education institutions. In addition, Orkodashvili (2013) pointed out that lack of cooperation between EQA bodies puts a strain on higher education institutions to meet the QA requirements of them all. Furthermore, it emerged from the findings that EQA bodies do not have systems in place for higher education institutions to appeal against accreditation outcomes, hence it seems that the institutions should just accept whatever feedback they receive from these bodies. McCurry (2018) asserted that EQA bodies may deliberately refrain from introducing such systems, because they want to avoid the associated costs and burden of petitions that could emanate from unsatisfactory programme accreditation outcomes.

Challenges to Harmonise Processes. A critical factor that seems to complicate streamlining of the accreditation processes is the fact that the functions of each EQA body are guided by legislative documents approved by Parliament, hence some of these bodies may be reluctant to harmonise the EQA processes because they just act in line with the powers assigned to them in their respective legislations. Beerkens (2015) and Orkodashvili (2013) reported that EQA bodies could sometimes be too focused on achieving their own strategic objectives and targets that they do not seem to recognise the call for collaboration and harmonisation of their processes. In a study conducted by Valeikienė (2017) it was reported that when passing national QA legislations, government offices may sometimes assign functions to different EQA bodies fit for their own political agendas or to satisfy accountability demands from the public that they do not recognise possible overlaps that may pose challenges later in conducting national QA processes. The findings also revealed that the accreditation guidelines of the EQA bodies are sometimes too different which makes streamlining difficult.

The final sub-question under the third research question asked the participants to give any suggestions/advice on what could be done to streamline the programme accreditation processes. The suggestions for improvement revealed through the findings are discussed in line with the Deming PDCA Quality Cycle.

Suggestions for Improvement

Harmonise Programme Accreditation Systems. There was a suggestion to harmonise the programme accreditation systems of the various EQA bodies, as already proposed in several studies conducted (Gover & Loukkola, 2018; Nabaho et al., 2020; PhillipsKPA, 2017; Waheed, 2018), by entering into agreements, amending the laws of the EQAAs (NQA and NCHE) and merging the EQAAs. The Deming PDCA Cycle is believed to contribute to the successful

amendment and enhancement of EQA systems and processes in higher education (Eby, 2019; Maruyama & Inoue, 2016; Mergen et al., 2014).

Entering into Agreements. By signing MoUs, arrangements could be agreed upon to do joint panel inspections (Friedman et al., 2017; PhillipsKPA, 2017) and to accept and endorse accreditation outcomes passed by professional bodies as such collaborations would be to the advantage of the higher education institutions as well as the EQA bodies in terms of resource efficiency. This finding is in line with Ayoo et al. (2020) who proposed that there should be common understanding and agreement between EQA bodies about what QA entails to ensure smooth alignment of their processes. One of the recommendations in the comprehensive study report on the Namibian higher education system was also that the NCHE and the NQA should establish obligatory contractual arrangements (NCHE, 2012). In addition, Manimala et al. advised that mutual agreements help to “minimize the burden of accreditation (in terms of the size of the visiting team, duration of visit, amount of data required, etc.)” (2020, p. 11).

The NCHE already emphasised that “QAAs and professional bodies should streamline and harmonise their QA processes, and do joint accreditation” (NCHE, 2019a, p. 21), which shows its support to rationalise the national programme accreditation systems. To streamline the QA processes, the findings revealed that the NCHE already signed MoUs with the other three EQA bodies (NQA, HPCNA and ECN); however, these agreements seemed not to work as expected, because instead of working together in harmony, the MoUs created contention between some of these bodies.

Furthermore, mutual recognition of accreditation outcomes by multiple EQA bodies was positively reported by PhillipsKPA (2017). However, the study conducted by McCurry (2018)

showed that the majority of the EQA bodies that participated in his investigation were against such arrangement.

Amending the Laws of the EQAAs. Amendment of the Parliamentary Acts of the NQA and the NCHE was proposed as one of the ways to harmonise these bodies' overlapping programme accreditation functions. One body ought to do programme accreditation and the other one ought to focus on the NQF, as this would increase efficiency. It came to light that the NCHE is battling for some years to amend the Higher Education Act 26 of 2003 in an attempt to streamline the accreditation functions. The amendment of some other Acts, including the Engineering Professions Bill 2019, was also noted. In general, the literature reviewed did not pertinently state the amendment of Acts as a way to streamline overlapping QA functions. However, some consultancy projects undertaken in Namibia recommended the amendment of the NQA Act and the Higher Education Act so solve the overlapping programme accreditation functions (NCHE, 2012; Shivor & Uupindi, 2008). Matengu et al. (2014) reported about the amendment of the Higher Education Act 26 of 2003, but this study did not explicitly state that the proposal to review this Act was due to the perceived overlapping functions of the EQA bodies. The ECN, on the other hand, was in the process of amending the Engineering Professions Act 18 of 1986 to cater for the accreditation of programmes in the engineering field, but approval of such amendment could even worsen the challenges higher education institutions face in terms of the overlapping programme accreditation functions. On a more positive note, Gover and Loukkola (2018) advised that governments and line ministries could modify EQA legislative frameworks so that associated guidelines and processes are suitable for their intended purposes. Additionally, Bailey (2015) reported about the integration or restructuring of EQA bodies into other bodies or sister organisations in cases where overlaps in QA functions were experienced. Other instances were

reported where Parliamentary Acts of EQA bodies were repealed to ensure rationalisation of overlapping QA functions (“BOTA and TEC finalise organisation restructuring,” 2013).

Merging the EQAAs. Participants further suggested a merger between the EQAAs (NQA and NCHE) to harmonise their intersecting programme accreditation functions and subsequently reduce the cost implications for both bodies. The proposal for a merger did not include the professional bodies (HPCNA and ECN), but a suggestion was made that the professional bodies could enter into MoUs with the EQAAs to collaborate in areas of mutual interest. According to ENQA (2012), it is not uncommon for EQA bodies to merge, since it may contribute to greater efficiency in national QA systems. Bailey and Chirwa (2015) also reported about BOTA that merged with the BQA because of a lack of coordination in EQA in higher education. However, according to the University World News, Africa Edition (2008), the instantaneous integration of systems may be a daunting task.

Clarify Mandates. Clarifying or simplifying the mandates of the EQA bodies through different platforms was another suggestion to ensure clear distinction between and understanding of the roles and functions of the EQA bodies, which is in line with the advice given in studies conducted by McCurry (2018) and PhillipsKPA (2017). In addition, findings that advocated for regular consultations between key stakeholders in higher education to discuss issues of common concern to ensure there is mutual understanding of the roles and functions of EQA bodies, were also evident in other studies (Atibuni, 2020; Friedman et al., 2017; McCurry, 2018).

Adopt Hybrid Accreditation Modes. A proposal to adopt hybrid or blended accreditation modalities was also made, which aligns with the study conducted by Pandey and Subedi (2023). This could save costs and time, be less physically demanding, and allow for the preparation of electronic files and a central database that could be accessed from anywhere by relevant

stakeholders in programme accreditation as well as video recordings of the facilities that are electronically availed to panel members. The findings surprisingly revealed that the NCHE has introduced virtual accreditation due to COVID-19. Although the introduction of blended or hybrid accreditation modes was not so visible in the literature reviewed, as this is a new approach and not yet practised in many countries, it was introduced in the Philippines and Nepal for the reasons mentioned and to reduce the strain on higher education institutions during accreditation visits (PAASCU, 2022; Pandey & Subedi, 2023). Atibuni (2020) also supported the use of technology in accreditation, while others advocated for online databases to store information required for accreditation (EQAR, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, Recognition and Accreditation, 2021). Though, Pandey and Subedi's (2023) study revealed some challenges for higher education institutions in terms of lack of or insufficient technological equipment and resources to fully integrate virtual accreditation.

The next section provides a summary of the main points discussed in this chapter.

Summary

This chapter mainly presented the findings as well as the evaluation of the findings of this qualitative case study. The introductory section of the chapter briefly summarised the purpose of the study, the participants of the study, sampling method and data collection methods used, and research ethics. This study was conducted to investigate the perceived overlapping functions of Namibia's EQA bodies and their effects on higher education institutions. The participants included academic staff members and QA and Accreditation officers from respectively NUST and IUM; and the NQA, NCHE, and HPCNA. Homogenous purposive sampling was employed and open-ended questions were posed during semi-structured individual interviews to gather the data. In addition, a small number of key documents, including the laws of the NQA, NCHE, and HPCNA

were analysed to complement the data obtained through the semi-structured individual interviews and for the purpose of triangulation. All required research ethics were adhered to, e.g., consent from the research sites and the participants were duly obtained and the anonymity of the participants and confidentiality of their responses were protected. The chapter comprised two main parts with three sections.

The first part of the chapter focused on sections one to two. Section one provided an explanation of the trustworthiness of the data gathered by means of semi-structured individual interviews and document analysis. It also included a discussion on the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The second section started with a short overview of the study, i.e. the research design, background information about the research sites and the participants, consent from the research sites and the participants, sampling method, pilot study, data collection and data analysis procedures.

The findings of the study were also presented in section two. The findings were based on the following three main research questions: (1) what functions are the NCHE, NQA, HPCNA, and ECN mandated to undertake as per their respective legislations; (2) what are the perceptions and views of the higher education institutions, the EQAAs, and professional bodies as regards the seemingly overlapping functions; and (3) how do the overlapping functions of the NCHE, NQA, HPCNA, and ECN affect Namibia's higher education institutions?

Furthermore, the demographic information of the participants as well as their background and experience in EQA were described. Before the findings were presented, a concept map that depicted the main themes, sub-themes and sub-sub-themes identified through the thematic analysis of the data obtained in the semi-structured individual interviews and the documents analysed, was presented to illustrate the research results in a visualised format. The findings were then presented

in detail according to the six main themes identified, i.e. Theme 1: Functions of EQA bodies; Theme 2: Views about overlaps; Theme 3: Effects of perceived overlapping functions; Theme 4: Benefits of programme accreditation; Theme 5: Challenges for higher education institutions; and Theme 6: Suggestions for improvement.

The second part of the chapter, which focused on section three, presented a discussion and evaluation of the findings with reference to the literature reviewed and the conceptual frameworks adopted for the study. The first conceptual framework, which was the Conceptual Model of Quality was used in this study to evaluate the purpose and mandates of the EQA bodies and whether they acted within their mandates (quality as purposeful); assess the ways in which the overlapping functions impacted higher education institutions (quality as transformative); determine if higher education institutions can meet the standards of all EQA bodies provided their overlapping functions (quality as exceptional); and evaluate if the higher education institutions could be held accountable to deliver quality education if they have to adhere to the QA standards of so many EQA bodies (quality as accountable). The second conceptual framework was the Deming PDCA Cycle, which includes a four-phased cycle of planning, doing, checking, and acting. The PDCA Cycle was integrated into the Conceptual Model of Quality (i.e. The PDCA Quality Conceptual Model) to design a plan of action the researcher proposed to assist relevant authorities and the EQA bodies to streamline their functions pertaining to programme accreditation. In addition, the suggestions for further improvement were based on the PDCA Cycle which is increasingly used to enhance the success of IQA and EQA systems in higher education.

Furthermore, the evaluation and discussion of the findings showed that all questions were answered when compared with the literature reviewed and the conceptual models adopted for this study. The discussion of the findings of the first research question that were based on the functions

of the EQA bodies, namely NQA, NCHE, HPCNA, and ECN, revealed that the NQA is rather doing institutional accreditation and not programme accreditation per se, the NCHE is charged with the responsibility of accrediting programmes, and the HPCNA and ECN are not mandated to accredit programmes. However, the HPCNA ventures into programme accreditation processes through the inspection and accreditation of facilities at higher education institutions.

With regards to the second research question, it came to light that the functions and roles of the EQA bodies indeed overlap considering the processes followed and criteria used for programme accreditation, and as a result, it created contention between especially the NQA and the NCHE. However, the ECN seems not to be involved in programme accreditation, hence it started with the amendment of its law to cater for the accreditation of programmes at higher education institutions in the future.

The discussion of the findings of the third research question were based on the effects of the perceived overlapping functions on higher education institutions, which were grouped into positive effects (increased staff motivation, improved IQA systems, and increased stakeholder trust) and negative effects (demands of accreditation, emotional impact on academics, difficulties with review panels, and decreased trust in accreditation outcomes); benefits of programme accreditation for higher education institutions (improves programme quality, improves good standing of institutions, and creates opportunities for institutions and students); challenges for higher education institutions, which were grouped into internal challenges (lack of resources and attitude towards accreditation) and external challenges (challenges with EQA bodies and challenges to harmonise processes); and suggestions for improvement (harmonise programme accreditation systems by entering into agreements, amending the laws and merging the EQAAs; clarify the mandates; and adopting hybrid accreditation modes).

CHAPTER 5: IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

An increased demand for higher education led to the growth of the higher education sector and consequently increased accountability towards the public to ensure and enhance the quality of education through trustworthy systems (Guang, 2016). Globally, governments were expected to accept the responsibility to develop and implement policies for assessing and assuring the quality of qualifications and competencies, study programmes, student learning experiences, knowledge, and skills, for wider access to and the successful completion of higher education to groom graduates for entrance into the workplace (Matengu et al., 2014). Therefore, the Namibian government had established several EQA bodies, including various professional bodies, to assure the quality of the country's higher education institutions through relevant EQA systems, policies, and processes.

The establishment of a mixture of EQA bodies inexorably resulted in an overlap of the roles of these bodies because all of them were mandated with some QA functions. This caused a duplication of EQA processes, a waste of institutional and government resources, and uncertainty among higher education institutions about which body is to do what. This situation prompted the researcher to investigate the perceived overlapping functions of Namibia's EQA bodies and their effect on higher education institutions, with the intention to explore the views of the higher education institutions, the EQAAs, and professional bodies concerning the mandates of the NQA, NCHE, HPCNA, and ECN; explore the perceptions and views of the higher education institutions and the EQA bodies concerning the overlaps; and establish what effects the overlapping functions have on higher education institutions. The researcher hoped that the unpacking of the mandates of the EQA bodies, the views of academics and staff of EQA bodies about the overlaps and how the situation affected institutions, would provide all stakeholders with a clear understanding of the

roles and functions of the EQA bodies and the way forward in terms of improving or resolving the situation.

This study was conducted between 01 March and 22 June 2022, and involved academic staff from various faculties at NUST and IUM as well as QA and Accreditation officers at the NQA, NCHE, and HPCNA. Homogeneous purposive sampling was used, and the data was collected through semi-structured individual interviews and document analysis. Two interview guides were used for the two sampling groups; however, the questions were almost identical. Before the initial interviews took place, permission was obtained from the relevant offices at the higher education institutions and the heads of the EQA bodies for inclusion in the investigation. Once the participants were identified, their consent to take part in the study was secured. All research ethics protocols were followed during the duration of the study. The privacy of the participants was protected throughout the data collection process and beyond. Trustworthiness of the data was ensured through a pilot study, approval of the research instruments by the UREC, member checking of the interview transcripts for the main study and triangulation. The latter was guaranteed by considering the following quality criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

The study had some limitations. The biggest limitation was in terms of the sample size, e.g., UNAM and ECN did not respond to the invitation to participate in the research, and four participants (two academics and two QA and Accreditation officers) withdrew from the study for various reasons, meaning that the responses of those potential participants could not be included in the data to add additional value to the study. This further reduced the sample size, making it even more difficult to generalise the results. Also, one of the interviewees was rather impatient and could only spare fifteen minutes for the interview. This caused the researcher to be nervous,

hence the interview took place in quite a hurry and no follow-up questions could be asked. Furthermore, upon request of some of the participants to share the interview questions, the researcher ended up sending the questions to everyone. Although many participants indicated that they did not have time to look at the questions or deliberately did not look at the questions as they wanted to give spontaneous responses, the objectivity of the data could be questioned. As the interviews were conducted virtually, another possible limitation could be the technical glitches or poor internet connectivity experienced during a couple of interviews. The researcher transcribed all interviews herself and analysed the data manually which was quite challenging for a novice researcher. The use of qualitative data analysis software could have enriched the findings. Lastly, document analysis could also have potential limitations, as all the data needed to answer the research questions could not be obtained from the documents that were analysed, and subjectivity of the authors and perhaps the researcher could be an issue (Triad 3, 2016). Furthermore, the deans of the faculties and the management of the EQA bodies were excluded from the study, and this could be a possible delimitation, because their views and experiences regarding the perceived overlapping programme accreditation roles could not be captured and included in the results.

This chapter consists of four sections. The first section discusses the significant results in line with the literature reviewed and the conceptual frameworks employed. It also evaluates the findings and associated implications for all concerned stakeholders regarding a possible review of the overlapping functions of the EQA bodies to ensure the programme accreditation processes are conducted more efficiently and effectively. The second and third sections respectively explain recommendations for application and recommendations for future research. The final section reflects on the entire study with particular focus on the findings and what it means for QA in higher education in Namibia.

Implications

This section discusses the possible effects or consequences that the findings may have on existing EQA systems, policies, and practices; the EQA bodies; the higher education institutions and other stakeholders in higher education, with particular focus on the overlapping programme accreditation functions and processes.

Research Question 1: What functions are the NCHE, NQA, HPCNA, and ECN mandated to undertake as per their respective legislations?

Functions of the EQA Bodies

This study found that the NQA primarily deals with the NQF but also conducts institutional accreditation. According to Castel-Branco (2022), it is common for national qualifications authorities to manage the NQF and accredit institutions. However, an unexpected finding was that the NQA also performs quality reviews on an institution's programmes during an institutional accreditation or audit site visit, which the higher education institutions interpret as programme accreditation, as stated by Sandra, QA and Accreditation Officer:

And, when they go out for ... institutional accreditation, they also look at the programmes that the institution offers. NQA doesn't call it programme accreditation, but institutional accreditation, but when they go and look at the institution, they also look at the programmes the institution is offering.

Simon, acting Associate Dean for Teaching and Learning, agreed with this statement because he remarked: "... as I said ... the programmes were accredited by the Namibia Qualifications Authority, NQA ..."

Also, something that was not clear is that it seems that there is inconsistency between the NQA Act and the NQA Regulations for the Accreditation of Persons, Institutions or

Organisations, because the Act stipulates that the NQA *accredits the capacity* of persons, institutions, and organisations *to offer* a course of instruction (which in fact is institutional accreditation), while the Regulations state that the NQA *accredits courses*. The latter could be attributed to author bias (Cardno, 2018; O’Leary, 2017) or a lack of understanding/knowledge about the field at the time when the regulations were developed. The status quo may cause confusion, which may contribute to and perhaps justify the NQA’s move to conduct institutional and programme accreditation concurrently, and not confine itself to a normal institutional audit where programmes are not the focus of the exercise. This was evident in the findings, because one of the QA and Accreditation officers, Aletta, responded as follows: “At times, even the workers themselves are confused. They don't know which institution is to do what and ... in the end, it's just confusion.” It may also beg the question to what extent the NQA is going when conducting programme accreditation or whether justice is done to the exercise, as Denise, Programme Coordinator, remarked: “While NQA looks at the syllabus or the curriculum, NCHE will go down to the assessments, the marking, the institution, so that's a more detailed accreditation.”

According to Chirwa (2014), it may not be possible to hold anyone accountable for an alleged improper exercise of power if the laws have grey areas. In addition, this finding seems to be contrary to the Conceptual Model of Quality that advocates for quality as purposeful, which means that it is essential that EQA bodies have clear mandates to exercise their functions within clearly defined limits (Gover & Loukkola, 2018), which seems not to be the case with the NQA. This situation may call for a review of the terminologies in the NQA Act and the NQA Regulations for the Accreditation of Persons, Institutions or Organisations to establish a clear understanding of what is meant by a course.

On the other hand, the findings revealed that the NCHE is explicitly charged with the accreditation of programmes at higher education institutions (Garwe, 2014; Higher Education Act, 2003; McCurry, 2018; ZimCHE, 2018) and that it acts within its mandate, which demonstrates quality as purposeful.

With regards to the HPCNA and ECN, it is evident that these bodies are not assigned any programme accreditation function. However, Ayoo et al. (2020) and McCurry (2018) claimed that it is not unusual for professional bodies to also accredit or validate programmes. According to the findings, the assessment and endorsement of curricula, and the registration of professionals, are the main functions of the HPCNA and the ECN. This is a common function of professional bodies that was also noted by the QAA (2018). Nevertheless, the HPCNA also conducts facility inspections and institutional site visits that may imply that it acts outside of its mandate. This was evident in the following response provided by Beauty, QA and Accreditation Officer: “... our law really doesn't require that we do accreditation of the facilities, but just to reassure ourselves that the institutions have the necessary human capacity as well as the required resources to offer the programme, we just do it ...” Accrediting the facilities of training providers necessitates a site visit to a particular institution that forms part of the normal accreditation processes, which means that this action of the HPCNA, like the NQA, is not in line with quality as fitness for purpose.

The fact that the NQA and the HPCNA venture into processes normally associated with programme accreditation contribute to the duplication of functions (Friedman et al., 2017; IIEP, 2020a; Imaniriho, 2020). What is more, the ECN also set a process in motion to amend the Engineering Professions Act to include programme accreditation as one of its functions (Engineering Professions Amendment Bill, 2019). The latter would mean that things may get even

more complicated for Namibia's higher education institutions that will have to meet the requirements of all these bodies.

Considering the findings of this study and the related literature reviewed, it could be reasoned that the first research objective of this study, i.e. to explore the views of the higher education institutions, the EQAAs, and the professional bodies concerning the mandates of the NQA, NCHE, HPCNA, and ECN, has been achieved. The findings confirmed that the functions in terms of programme accreditation conducted by the NQA, NCHE, and HPCNA certainly overlap to a very large extent. This may have implications for law makers and policy developers that may compel or motivate them to relook at the allocation of QA functions to the different EQA bodies to avoid further ambiguities and wasting of government and institutional resources. Shindi strongly cautioned that overlapping mandates of EQA bodies result in "an inefficient use of resources, and harms their ... effectiveness" (2018, p. 21).

Research Question 2: What are the perceptions and views of the higher education institutions, the EQAAs, and the professional bodies as regards the seemingly overlapping functions?

Overlapping Roles

The perception that the functions of the EQA bodies overlap, was confirmed by the findings of this study. This finding was expected and is in line with recent studies conducted on similar topics (Friedman et al., 2017; McCurry, 2018; PhillipsKPA, 2017). This situation also relates to what was experienced in Botswana a few years back that convinced higher education authorities to review EQA systems and practices to increase efficiency and coordination of QA processes in higher education ("BOTA, TEC Merger Long Overdue," 2009). The overlapping functions could cause some kind of reluctance from the side of the EQAAs to turn a blind eye to the duplications,

because they are rightfully acting within their assigned mandates, which is in fact something they cannot be blamed for. Should the relevant authorities in higher education make this a non-issue, the overlaps will most probably continue and in the process negatively affect the quality of Namibia's higher education system. While there is a big fuss, globally as well, for well-coordinated EQA structures and mechanisms to assess the quality of higher education (CHEA, 2015), this could be the right time for Namibia to take appropriate action to rectify or improve the situation faced by higher education institutions and EQA bodies regarding the overlapping programme accreditation functions. Echoing the sentiments of the CHEA, Kauppila emphasised the efficiency of QA systems and practices that “should function as a coherent whole” (2016, p. 19).

Different Focus Points

Irrespective of the overlaps, there was a strong feeling among the participants that programme validation/accreditation by professional bodies is vital and needed because of their distinctive quality requirements, different focus points and unique processes (Ibrahim, 2014; PhillipsKPA, 2017; Qadir, 2020). Peter, HoD, explained as follows:

What the professional bodies do ... is not accreditation, in the sense of input-based accreditation, but output-based validation of a programme. In the case where you have input-based accreditation by the NCHE and output-based accreditation by the professional body, I think one cannot really speak of duplication.

Hence, should reviews of any kind be considered, professional bodies should remain with their functions even if it would mean they will also accredit the programmes in their specific professional fields of study.

Comparable Accreditation Processes and Standards

The NQA, NCHE, and HPCNA follow similar programme accreditation processes that start with the submission of a self-evaluation report, followed by a site visit to the institution and issuing of a review panel report, and ends with the presentation of the outcome to the institution, which is supported by existing literature and regarded as generic QA processes that are employed globally (Ayoo et al., 2020; Cirlan & Loukkola, 2021; Hernández-Fernández et al., 2021; McCurry, 2018). The findings further revealed that these EQA bodies also use similar accreditation criteria, as pointed out in previous studies (IIEP, 2020b; Manimala et al., 2020; Matei & Iwinska, 2016). However, Makhoul (2019) and McCurry (2018) argued that the accreditation criteria are not always the same as the type of programme accredited often dictates the type of criteria to be used. The fact that three out of the four EQA bodies have the same accreditation processes, using similar accreditation criteria, have severe implications for higher education institutions as discussed later in this section under the third research question.

Competition Among EQA Bodies

The overlapping programme accreditation functions seemingly resulted in competition between the NQA and the NCHE (Imaniriho, 2020; NCHE, 2012), which consequently put the effectiveness and the purpose of these bodies at risk and, therefore, does not align with the concept of quality as purposeful (Gover & Loukkola, 2018; Morales, 2019). This situation calls for immediate intervention as ignoring it may cause increased rivalry between these bodies, which may divert their focus from their key mandates and further disadvantage the higher education institutions.

The second objective of this study was to explore the perceptions of the higher education institutions and the EQA bodies concerning the seemingly overlapping functions, and the findings

confirmed that the perceptions about the overlaps are correct. Among the findings for this study, overlapping roles and comparable accreditation processes and standards surfaced more strongly in existing literature.

Research Question 3: How do the overlapping functions of the NCHE, NQA, HPCNA, and ECN affect Namibia's higher education institutions?

Positive Effects

Some positive effects reported include increased staff motivation, improved IQA systems, and increased stakeholder trust. Positive accreditation outcomes stimulate the creativity of academics and serve as a catalyst for keeping up with good practices and advancements in their areas of teaching (Liu et al., 2015; PhillipsKPA, 2017). Cognisant of the visits by multiple EQA bodies and the demands of accreditation, the institutions ensure that budgetary provision is made to have their programmes accredited, which agrees with the findings in the study conducted by Saeed et al. (2015). However, Istileulova (2018) and Kelchen (2017) reported contrasting findings about the rigidity of some EQA bodies which curb academics' innovativeness.

Increased staff motivation results in improved IQA systems (Ogbeche, 2021), e.g., enhancement of the examination and moderation system in one university and the establishment of IQA units in higher education institutions (Albaqami, 2019). Improved IQA systems contribute to increased trust from stakeholders (students, parents, and industry) in the education and services offered by higher education institutions, as pointed out in Ibrahim's study (2014).

These findings, altogether, align with the Conceptual Model of Quality, i.e. quality as exceptional and transformative (creativity of the academics to excel in their teaching); quality as accountable (budgetary provisions made for accreditation); and quality as transformative (improved IQA systems and increased stakeholder trust). However, the ability of EQA processes

to contribute to quality as transformative was queried in several studies, as these processes seemingly do not adequately improve the operations of higher education institutions (Beerkens, 2018; Bishoff, 2018; Leiber et al., 2018; Lucander & Christersson, 2020; Nyamwesa et al., 2020; Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018).

The fact that the overlapping functions of the EQA bodies have a positive effect on these institutions might be seen as them having accepted the status quo and that they may even put in more effort in the future to satisfy the requirements of all these bodies.

Negative Effects

Demands of Accreditation. Several reasons were stated for demands of accreditation conducted by multiple EQA bodies: it is time-consuming, a burden to academics, increases workloads, causes accreditation fatigue, interferes with teaching duties, has huge cost implications, no alignment between accreditation periods, and causes delays in programme implementation. The same issues were reported in numerous studies reviewed (Atibuni, 2020; Friedman et al., 2017; Garwe, 2019; Huang, 2017; Imaniriho, 2020; Killian, 2023; Kis, 2005; Martin, 2018b; Pandey & Subedi, 2023; PhillipsKPA, 2017). Surprisingly, interference with academics' research time or infringement on institutional autonomy were not found as impacting factors by the academics, unlike what was reported by Friedman et al. (2017) and PhillipsKPA (2017) in similar studies conducted.

Emotional Impact on Academics. In agreement with the results in several research studies (Alshamsi et al., 2020; Atibuni, 2020; Matei & Iwinska, 2016; Weir, 2009), accreditation by multiple accreditation bodies tends to make the academics anxious and concerned, and the accreditation outcomes often keep them in suspense, because sometimes they may receive diverse accreditation outcomes from the different bodies. One of the programme coordinators, Mary, said:

“I think the worst is the unknown ... you don't know who is coming and then there is a sort of fear that's installed in you.”

Difficulties with Review Panels. Concerns were raised about some panel members who try to impose their ideas or practices that they use in their home countries on the higher education institutions, are unfamiliar with local practices, are biased in determining accreditation outcomes, and seem to lack expertise in certain fields of study (Atibuni, 2020; PhillipsKPA, 2017; Torre & Zapata, 2013).

Decreased Trust in Accreditation Outcomes. Concern was expressed about accreditation outcomes that could be contradicting because the processes of the EQA bodies are not coordinated, and this may cause higher education institutions to lose trust in the credibility of national QA systems (Garwe, 2019). The NCHE also cautioned that higher education institutions will lose trust in the “credibility [of] the accreditation if the outcomes are different ...” (2019a, p. 21) in a report on the first conference on QA in higher education in Namibia. With reference to the NCHE report, one may argue that this study is timely in the sense that if institutions, as cautioned, start losing trust in accreditation outcomes it will surely defeat the purpose of the accreditation conducted by these EQA bodies. Hence, the overlapping functions need to be addressed sooner than later.

The findings concerning the negative effects reported in this study do not align with the Conceptual Model of Quality (i.e. quality as purposeful, quality as exceptional, quality as transformative and quality as accountable), as higher education institutions may find it challenging to satisfy the QA requirements of multiple EQA bodies (Atibuni, 2020). Should this situation not be addressed or given the required attention, it could have severe implications for the quality of Namibia’s higher education system as institutions may start resisting the practice of having

accreditation by multiple EQA bodies, as cautioned by Alshamsi et al. (2020); become non-responsive to calls for accreditation; or they may be provoked to ask: Whose standards or why multiple bodies' standards? (Atibuni, 2020).

Benefits of Programme Accreditation

In agreement with existing literature (Atibuni, 2020; Berse, 2018; Bishoff, 2018; Dicker et al., 2018; Friedman et al., 2017; PhillipsKPA, 2017; Simukungwe, 2018), the findings in this study confirmed that EQA enhances the quality of programmes and the credibility of institutions, thereby ensuring public trust and confidence in the academic offerings and services of higher education institutions; creates benchmarking and networking opportunities for the institutions; and increases student mobility, the credibility of graduates and graduate employability.

These findings align with the concepts of quality as exceptional or attaining high standards (Gover & Loukkola, 2018) and quality as transformative, as described in the Conceptual Model of Quality (Schindler et al., 2015). The benefits could be regarded as complementary to the positive effects, earlier discussed in this section, and hence as a motivational factor for the higher education institutions to continue trying their best to meet the QA standards of the different EQA bodies.

Internal Challenges

Inadequate Resources. The findings revealed that the higher education institutions are faced with a shortage of human and financial resources that may hamper their chances to pass the accreditation of multiple EQA bodies. Accreditation by more than one body results in "... a duplication of resource demands" (Friedman et al., 2017, p. 8), which subsequently drains the resources of the institutions. Another resource limitation is inadequate and/or poorly resourced IQA offices in higher education institutions, which was also pointed out by Swanzy et al. (2018).

Attitude Towards Accreditation. The findings revealed that some academics do not seem to value programme accreditation and they would easily participate under false pretences. Academics may be discouraged to cooperate because of the additional workload caused by accreditation (Mahmoodian et al., 2016). The management sometimes is also reluctant to support accreditation exercises, which may constrain efforts to satisfy accreditation conditions (Afolabi & Idowu, 2019).

External Challenges

Challenges with EQA Bodies. There is a lack of communication between the EQA bodies and higher education institutions as well as a lack of collaboration between the EQA bodies themselves which pose challenges for institutions during accreditation. This finding concurs with a study done by Orkodashvili (2013). EQA bodies also do not have appeals systems in place, so higher education institutions cannot appeal against unsatisfactory accreditation outcomes which put pressure on them to address accreditation conditions and recommendations (McCurry, 2018).

Challenges to Harmonise Processes. The functions of the EQA bodies are guided by Acts of Parliament and their accreditation guidelines are often too programme-specific, which may complicate streamlining of the accreditation processes. According to Valeikienė (2017), governments may tend to satisfy their own political agendas or accountability demands from the public when passing national QA legislations that they do not recognise dual responsibilities allocated to different bodies at the time of passing these laws. On the other hand, EQA bodies are at times too focused on achieving their own strategic objectives and targets that they do not seem to recognise the call for harmonisation and, in the process, putting increased pressure on higher education institutions to meet their requirements (Beerens, 2015; Orkodashvili, 2013).

These challenges all together, like the negative effects, do not align with the Conceptual Model of Quality, because it could be extremely difficult for these institutions to achieve exceptional standards or to transform in a positive way if they cannot overcome the identified challenges. In addition, being caught up in all these challenges, one may argue that it would be impossible for higher education institutions to be held accountable for assuring the quality of their programmes and related academic services or maintaining external quality standards as expected by the EQA bodies and other stakeholders in higher education. Hence, appropriate action should be taken to relieve the pressure on higher education institutions and to ultimately have a harmonised and effective national EQA system fit for purpose.

The third objective of the study, i.e. to find out what effects the overlaps in the QA functions of the NQA, NCHE, HPCNA, and ECN have on Namibia's higher education institutions, was adequately addressed, and align well with existing literature.

The last sub-question under the third research question asked the participants to make suggestions on what could be done to streamline the programme accreditation processes of the EQA bodies.

Suggested Improvements

Harmonise Programme Accreditation Systems. The programme accreditation systems and processes could be harmonised. The following was commented by Sandra, QA and Accreditation Officer:

... I think harmonisation is very important in our case ... looking at the time we spend to do programme accreditation, the efforts put in, the resources put in. We can save on costs involving experts. We can save on time. We can save on efforts made to look at the programmes.

Harmonisation could be achieved through various interventions: the EQA bodies should sign MoUs, the Acts of the NQA and NCHE should be amended, and the NQA and NCHE should merge. Similar advice pertaining to the signing of MoUs and the merging of EQAAs was given in existing literature reviewed (Ayoo et al., 2020; Gover & Loukkola, 2018; Nabaho et al., 2020; NCHE, 2012; PhillipsKPA, 2017; Waheed, 2018). Areas of collaboration should include joint panel inspections and mutual recognition of accreditation outcomes to increase resource efficiency. However, McCurry (2018) reported resistance against mutual recognition of accreditation outcomes. Manimala et al. (2020) advised that collaboration makes accreditation easier, as smaller review panels can be used, the site visit can be shortened, and similar evidence documents can be used for various EQA bodies. The findings also revealed that there are already MoUs in place between the NCHE and the other three EQA bodies, but there seem to be challenges to successfully implement these agreements. Going forward, it would be advisable for these bodies to thrash out their differences to avoid further complications in programme accreditation processes.

There was also a suggestion to amend the Acts of the NQA and the NCHE, and to achieve greater efficiency, the programme accreditation and NQF related functions should be split between the two EQAAs. The amendment of Acts did not overtly feature in the literature reviewed for this study; however, there were some reports on Namibian higher education related issues that recommended the amendment of the legislations of the two EQAAs (NCHE 2019a; NCHE, 2012). Gover and Loukkola (2018) also suggested the modification of legislative frameworks to ensure fitness for purpose in EQA processes. In addition, the integration of EQA bodies into sister organisations was reported by Bailey (2015) or the total revocation of legislations (“BOTA and TEC finalise organisation restructuring,” 2013).

Furthermore, merging the NQA and the NCHE was another suggestion revealed through the findings, the rationale being increased cost-efficiency. Mergers between EQA bodies were positively reported in some studies (ENQA, 2012), e.g., BOTA that merged with the BQA to address issues of poor coordination (Bailey & Chirwa, 2014). The suggestions indicated that the HPCNA and the ECN should remain as is, but collaborations should be forged with the NQA and the NCHE through MoUs.

Amending the Acts of the NQA and the NCHE or merging the two bodies could have severe implications for these bodies and for the government in terms of human, financial, time, and infrastructural resources. The findings also revealed that amendment of the Higher Education Act 26 of 2003 was underway in an effort to streamline the accreditation functions. In addition, the existence of the Engineering Professions Bill 2019 came to light to include programme accreditation as one of the ECN's functions. Some of the participants complained about the EQA bodies that do not cooperate and are working in isolation, as Simon, acting Associate Dean for Teaching and Learning, remarked: "... at the present moment, that situation of having multiple bodies create silos where this body works independently. They do not even know whether what they are talking about has been addressed ..." Lack of cooperation may be the reason why the ECN tries to have programme accreditation as a function, while the NCHE attempts to streamline the programme accreditation functions. Hence, a decision to amend the Acts would require careful deliberations and meticulous planning to ensure stakeholder trust and buy-in.

Clarify Mandates. The findings advised clarification of the mandates of the EQA bodies to ensure a clear demarcation and comprehension of their roles and functions. The same advice was given in studies conducted by McCurry (2018) and PhillipsKPA (2017). Other studies advised regular stakeholder consultations to take place to deliberate on issues of common concern to ensure

there is mutual understanding of the roles and functions of the EQA bodies (Atibuni, 2020; Friedman et al., 2017; McCurry, 2018). Mbongi, one of the HoD's, responded:

I think they need to have a workshop themselves, NCHE, NQA ... the Minister of Education, the Executive Director, the other ministers from various ministries and so forth ... then they establish the particular roles which should be done by each and every one ... then things won't overlap. Things will work. Things will make sense.

Adopt Hybrid Accreditation Modes. Hybrid or blended accreditation modalities would be less time-consuming and more cost-effective, less physically demanding, and create opportunities to use electronic filing systems, videos and a central database that should be easily accessible to stakeholders in programme accreditation. Eon, a Programme Coordinator, responded: "... I think if all of the accreditation bodies would agree to the format of a visit, being not just face-to-face, but also in a hybrid format, the visits will be shorter and ... cheaper." The findings also revealed that the NCHE has adopted virtual accreditation due to COVID-19. Blended or hybrid accreditation did not really feature among the literature reviewed, and it was only recently introduced (PAASCU, 2022; Pandey & Subedi, 2023). Some studies supported the use of technology in accreditation (Atibuni, 2020), while others advocated for online accreditation databases (EQAR, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, Recognition and Accreditation, 2021). While blended accreditation modalities could be cost-effective for some, it would be cost-defective for others, as it requires reliable internet infrastructure, technical know-how and proper equipment (e.g. video cameras to do quality recordings of facilities) among other, as reported by Pandey and Subedi (2023).

The next section discusses the recommendations for application.

Recommendations for Application

The following recommendations for application were derived from the findings and conclusions of this study:

Clarify Roles and Functions of EQA Bodies

This study found that the functions of the NCHE, NQA and HPCNA in terms of the accreditation of programmes overlap to a very large extent, causing a wastage of government and institutional resources. Inconsistencies in the NQA Act 29 of 1996 and the NQA Regulations for the Accreditation of Persons, Institutions or Organisations of 2006 were observed, which led to the NQA also conducting programme accreditation, while it is mandated to do institutional accreditation only. The HPCNA also conducts facility inspections and accreditation, while it is not assigned an accreditation function. The status quo led to multiple visits from these EQA bodies to the higher education institutions to fulfil the same function. This situation puts a lot of strain on the institutions and, therefore, it is recommended that the matter is addressed with immediate effect by elucidating the mandates, roles, and functions of these bodies in the most appropriate way. For example, the heads, the managers who oversee programme accreditation, and the QA and Accreditation officers of the NQA, NCHE, HPCNA, and ECN, including representatives from the higher education institutions as well as the Ministry of Higher Education, Technology, and Innovation, should thoroughly analyse and deliberate on the roles and functions of the EQA bodies to find common ground on the issue. Considering the ECN being in the process of amending the Engineering Profession Amendment Act 25 of 1991, it is important that the ECN should be part of the deliberations. The EQA bodies should spearhead the intervention in collaboration with the Ministry of Higher Education, Technology, and Innovation. Gover and Loukkola (2018), who were involved in a project to identify the challenges that hamper the quality enhancement of higher

education in Europe and propose changes to be affected to address the challenges, noted the essence of unambiguous policies, roles, and functions of EQA bodies to ensure fitness for purpose. In another study, regular stakeholder consultations were advised to deliberate on issues of common concern to ensure there is mutual understanding of the roles and functions of EQA bodies (Atibuni, 2020; Friedman et al., 2017; McCurry, 2018).

Professional Bodies Should Conduct Programme Accreditation

It was found that professional bodies play a crucial role in ensuring the quality of their respective professions. Alina, HoD, commented:

I can understand that professional bodies need to exist. Regulations for professional bodies need to exist; that we cannot do without. There's a lot of overlap, but like I said, with the professional bodies, it is necessary for them to oversee those particular professions.

Their quality criteria are unique because of the specialised fields they oversee, and therefore, they have different focus points and follow unique processes when validating or accrediting programmes. Hence, it is recommended that the HPCNA and the ECN should accredit professional programmes in their specialised areas. Subsequently, the Allied Health Professions Act 7 of 2004 should be amended to add programme accreditation as a function and the Engineering Professions Bill 2019 ratified. However, the existing MoUs that these bodies have with the NCHE should be thoroughly revised to include mutual areas of cooperation such as joint panel site visits, mutual recognition of accreditation outcomes (PhillipsKPA, 2017), and blended accreditation, among other, to avoid overburdening the institutions. Should these MoUs be effectively implemented and honoured, it may also eliminate the decreased stakeholder trust in accreditation processes and outcomes. According to Ayoo et al. (2020) and McCurry (2018), it is a common phenomenon for

professional bodies to also accredit programmes. This recommendation should be spearheaded by the EQA bodies in collaboration with the Ministry of Higher Education, Technology, and Innovation as the line ministry to which all higher education related issues should be reported.

Synchronise Programme Accreditation Processes and Standards

It became known that the NQA, NCHE, and HPCNA use similar programme accreditation processes and criteria, causing duplication in many ways, e.g., the higher education institutions must prepare the same types of evidence documents multiple times for accreditation visits by different EQA bodies, which can sometimes happen at the same time. The study found that these repetitious processes take their toll on the institutions because they are demanding in terms of financial and human resources, and they have an emotional impact on the academics. It was reported that previous attempts were made by the EQA bodies to harmonise the accreditation criteria and processes, but without much success. To synchronise the accreditation processes and criteria, the following are recommended:

- Design joint accreditation manuals to conduct joint evaluations (NCHE, 2019b; NCHE & ICAN, 2017), including the use of standardised templates for self-evaluation reports and review panel reports (McCurry, 2018). Waheed (2018) noted that these kinds of arrangements heighten opportunities for the integration of QA policies, systems, and procedures and could augment uniformity, effectiveness, and efficiency in the execution of assigned roles and functions. Joint accreditation will ensure the use of combined review panels (Manimala et al., 2020) and alignment of accreditation periods (Friedman et al., 2017; PhillipsKPA, 2017).
- The use of technology in accreditation should be promoted (Atibuni, 2020; Pandey & Subedi, 2023). For instance, instead of having a physical site visit by the entire review

panel, visual recordings of the facilities and infrastructure should be made that can be viewed and assessed by review panels through electronic links; and interviews with various stakeholders should be conducted virtually via electronic platforms, e.g., Zoom (Pandey & Subedi, 2023).

- A national online accreditation database on which generic evidence documents can be stored electronically should be created (EQAR, 2016; Manimala et al., 2020; PhillipsKPA, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, Recognition and Accreditation, 2021). As advised by PhillipsKPA (2017), it is recommended that the accreditation database should be password protected and the users register to access the information to safeguard institutional data.

The database should be hosted by the NCHE and updated every semester.

Nabaho et al. (2020) posited that harmonisation of QA systems, policies, and procedures is regarded critical to encourage and ensure liability, limpidity, and value for money. The EQA bodies in collaboration with the Ministry of Higher Education, Technology, and Innovation should jointly coordinate the implementation of this recommendation.

Merge the NCHE and NQA

It is recommended that the NQA and the NCHE should be joined. Tuyeni, QA and Accreditation Officer, responded as follows:

They need to be merged to become maybe one institution ... to avoid the duplications. Both NQA and NCHE ... are fully funded by the Ministry of Education. If it was one body, I think that would save money. Imagine now, you are funding two institutions to go and duplicate functions.

Joining the two bodies into one organisation would require a repeal of the Higher Education Act 26 of 2003 and the NQA Act 29 of 1996, which should be put into motion as a matter of urgency.

The programme accreditation and NQF related functions should then be carried out by two different departments or sections within the newly created body. The Ministry of Higher Education, Technology, and Innovation, as the parliamentary representative of the higher education sector, should constitute a task force to facilitate the process. This task force should include representatives from both the NQA and the NCHE, public and private higher education institutions as well as representatives from key personnel in relevant government offices involved in the planning and development of legislations for national development. Successful mergers between EQA bodies were reported in the literature reviewed (Bailey & Chirwa, 2014; ENQA, 2012).

Furthermore, the task force should undertake a benchmarking visit to Botswana to learn good practices in the merger between BOTA and the BQA. The merger between the NQA and the NCHE would also address the challenges to harmonise the programme accreditation processes, resolve the issue of competition between the two bodies and simultaneously increase efficiency.

Adequately Train Review Panels

The study revealed various difficulties with review panels, hence training of review panel members is highly recommended and should form part of the introductory activities of programme accreditation. The EQA bodies should conduct a one-day training workshop for all review panels. The training agenda should include among other: the role of the chairperson, the role of the reviewers, professionalism and confidentiality, time management, brief introduction of the national EQA system, brief introduction of the higher education institution and the programme submitted for accreditation, sharing of good practices, and evaluation of the training intervention. Review panels must be trained appropriately to ensure they stick to evaluation procedures and show understanding of a particular country's QA system, the programmes of study submitted for

accreditation and the institutional context, according to related studies reviewed (King, 2012; National Center for Professional Education Quality Assurance Foundation, 2021).

Regular Communication Between EQA Bodies and Higher Education Institutions

Lack of communication between the EQA bodies and the higher education institutions was reported. Therefore, regular communication among the EQA bodies and the higher education institutions (Friedman et al., 2017; IIEP, 2020a; PhillipsKPA, 2017) is recommended through various platforms, such as discussion forums, workshops, trimester meetings, etc. to discuss matters of concern, sensitise the institutions about EQA processes, and share good EQA practices (McCurry, 2018). According to Knight and Allen (2012), the Deming PDCA Cycle can be used effectively to assure constant communication among various stakeholders in QA in higher education. The EQA bodies should facilitate the proposed interventions.

Establish and Implement an Effective Appeals Systems

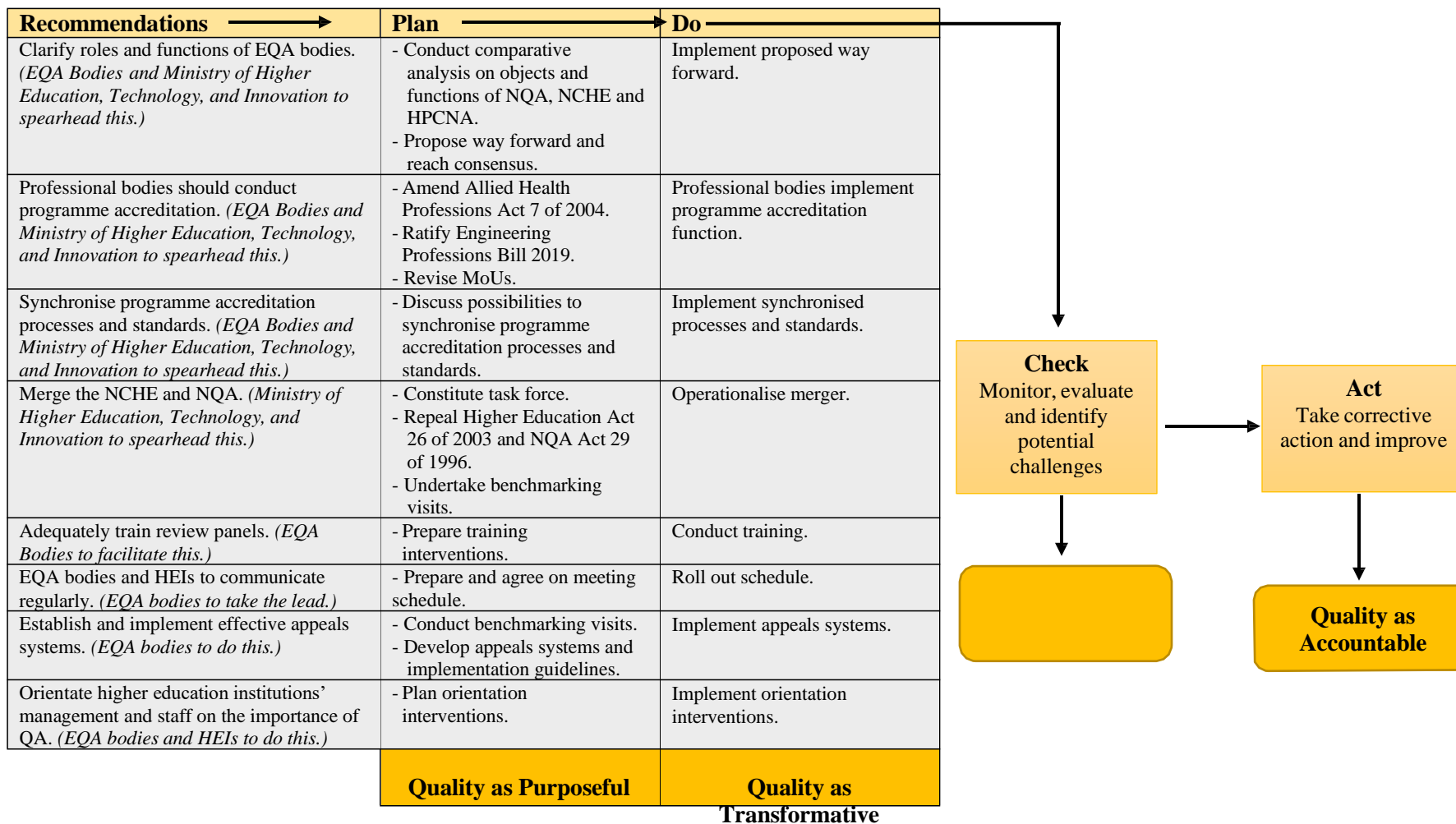
The findings also revealed that there are no appeals systems in place, hence higher education institutions cannot file complaints or express dissatisfaction with unfair accreditation outcomes. Aletta, QA and Accreditation Officer, remarked: “Like for the NCHE ... there is no appeals system in place. So, now let's say, NCHE fails them, NQA passes them, they cannot appeal. So, it's also another frustrating thing for the institutions.” It is, therefore, recommended that the EQA bodies should establish appeals systems with immediate effect, as encouraged by the ASG-QA (AUC & EUC, 2018), to grant the institutions a fair chance to express concern about or dissatisfaction with programme accreditation outcomes. Benchmarking with EQA bodies that successfully implemented appeals systems, regionally and internationally, should be conducted to ensure alignment with good international EQA practices.

Orientate Higher Education Institutions' Management and Staff on the Importance of QA

Internal challenges, such as negative attitudes of academics towards accreditation, inadequate management support, inadequate human and financial support, and inadequate and/or poorly resourced IQA offices were revealed. Thus, the following is recommended:

- The EQA bodies, in collaboration with the IQA offices, should orientate the management and staff of higher education institutions on the importance of both EQA and IQA through programme accreditation workshops, webinars, discussion forums, and other relevant platforms to create awareness of and the necessary support, appreciation, and accountability for IQA. In the QA discourse, higher education institutions are expected to be the custodians of quality, nurture a quality culture, and take accountability for QA, as emphasised in numerous studies (Atibuni, 2020; Friedman et al., 2017; Gover & Loukkola, 2018). However, Makhoul (2019) advised that EQA bodies should be held equally accountable for the impact they have on higher education institutions' quality.
- The departments that submit programmes for accreditation, in collaboration with the IQA offices, should present and discuss improvement plans, detailing programme accreditation conditions and recommendations, proposed corrective actions, timelines, and cost implications with the executive management of the institutions after programme accreditation visits to ensure the required budgetary provision is made to meet the conditions and implement the recommendations within the set timelines. According to Hegji (2020), it is imperative to motivate the entire campus community to adopt a collaborative approach in the development, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of QA activities.

The researcher developed a proposed plan of action (Figure 14) based on the recommendations for application discussed above.

Figure 14*Plan of Action to Address Overlapping Programme Accreditation Functions*

The proposed plan of action is based on the 'PDCA Quality Conceptual Model' (see Figure 4) to address the overlapping functions. The latter is an amalgamate of the Deming PDCA Cycle (Plan-Do-Check-Act) and the Conceptual Model of Quality (quality as purposeful, quality as transformative, quality as exceptional, and quality as accountable) suggested by the researcher that could hopefully aid in addressing related as well as other challenges in QA in higher education. The Deming PDCA Cycle is believed to contribute to the successful amendment and enhancement of EQA systems and processes in higher education (Eby, 2019; Maruyama & Inoue, 2016; Mergen et al., 2014). In addition, Taber et al. (2020) claimed that the concept of quality as fitness for purpose could be suitable for modifying diverse accreditation systems and practices to be fitting for a particular purpose or context.

The proposed action plan in Figure 14 leans more towards the four phases of the PDCA Cycle (Plan-Do-Check-Act), with the integration of the four notions of quality, namely quality as purposeful, quality as transformative, quality as exceptional and quality as accountable, to provide a comprehensive picture of how the PDCA Cycle and the Conceptual Model of Quality were combined to address the overlapping programme accreditation functions in the Namibian higher education sector. According to Patel and Deshpande (2017), the formulation of recommendations could happen during the planning phase, but since this study has identified some recommendations already for consideration by relevant stakeholders in the Namibian higher education sector, the planning phase will take off once the proposed plan of action is accepted for implementation. This phase will then be followed by the subsequent phases as described in Figure 14.

In view of the proposed action plan, the activities that will be executed in the planning phase, will help the EQA bodies to identify, thresh out and reach consensus on their core mandates, including their missions, goals, and objectives to mainly streamline all QA activities pertaining to

programme accreditation. Most importantly, the planning phase should help the EQA bodies to achieve quality as purposeful; they need to reach the point where they realise why each body was initially established (their purpose) and honour their assigned roles and functions to eliminate the duplications. In the doing phase, the suggested activities should be carried out to bring about positive changes and add additional value to the QA processes undertaken during programme accreditation. If implementation of these activities could happen as planned, it will help the EQA bodies to achieve the transformative notion of quality. During the checking phase, continuous monitoring and evaluation should take place to identify any challenges that could hamper the progress of the implementation processes. Improvement plans could then be generated to safeguard the standard of quality and ensure exceptional quality is upheld. Finally, the acting phase provides opportunities for corrective actions by implementing the improvement plans developed in the checking phase. This can be done by forming alliances, agreements, or partnerships (Patel & Deshpande, 2017) to achieve greater accountability. For instance, the EQA bodies and higher education institutions could combine forces, depending on the challenges identified, to ensure improvement plans are implemented successfully.

In the subsequent section, the recommendations for future research are discussed.

Recommendations for Future Research

Advancing recommendations for future, complementary or follow-up research is an important component of an investigation. Table 6 provides a summary of the key recommendations suggested for future research. There are specific recommendations that emanated from the findings of the current study complemented by the literature reviewed, but the researcher also felt the need to make general recommendations derived from other key aspects of the current study.

Table 6*Recommendations for Future Research*

Findings of this Study	Literature Reviewed	Specific Recommendations
Reduced trust caused by conflicting accreditation outcomes passed by the different EQA bodies.	Garwe (2019) reported about a situation where there was disagreement between certain EQA bodies concerning the accreditation outcome of a programme. Such occurrences lead to distrust (NCHE, 2019a).	Follow-up research could study the impact of conflicting accreditation outcomes on higher education institutions, students and EQA bodies.
IQA offices often do not receive sufficient support. A lack of financial and human resources, including lack of management support, often curb their operations.	Studies revealed that when IQA is effectively managed, it could successfully contribute to gaining from EQA (Martin, 2018b; Matei & Iwinska, 2016).	An investigation could be conducted on the importance of and support for IQA units in higher education institutions.
Review panels often tend to force their way of doing things in their own countries on the institutions whose programmes they assess, they are not acquainted with local QA systems, and they lack expertise in the area from which the programme under review stem.	Similar concerns about review panels were noted by PhillipsKPA (2017) and Torre and Zapata (2013).	Therefore, it is recommended that a study is carried out to examine the efficiency of and the extent to which external review panels add value to IQA.
Professional body accreditation is indispensable, without a doubt, as these bodies (ECN and HPCNA) focus on the outputs of an academic programme, while the other two (NQA and NCHE) focus on the inputs to evaluate the quality of a programme.	PhillipsKPA (2017) carried out an investigation on the extent and scope of the processes applied by professional bodies when accrediting programmes.	A similar study could be carried out in the context of Namibia to determine the importance and value of professional body accreditation.

The Higher Education Act 26 of 2003 and the NQA Act 29 of 1996 should be amended to streamline the accreditation processes, yet this proved to be a complicated task.	A few studies reviewed reported about the amendment of the Higher Education Act and the NQA Act to streamline the duplication of programme accreditation functions carried out by the NQA and NCHE (NCHE 2012; Shivoro & Uupindi, 2008).	Future investigations could explore the need for amending the legislations of EQAAs to streamline overlapping EQA roles and functions.
There was a proposal from the participants to merge the NQA and the NCHE.	Bailey and Chirwa (2014) reported about the joining of EQA bodies to eliminate overlapping accreditation functions.	Future research could explore the successes and challenges of merging EQA bodies to inform evidence-based policy development and reviews in higher education QA.
Other Key Aspects of the Study	Literature Reviewed	General Recommendations
The Conceptual Frameworks of this study (i.e. Conceptual Model of Quality and the Deming PDCA Model).	Both models are often used to improve EQA and IQA systems (Taber et al., 2020; Eby, 2019; Maruyama & Inoue, 2016; Mergen et al., 2014).	The researcher integrated the two Models and proposed that research is conducted to establish the effectiveness of combining conceptual frameworks for QA in enhancing the quality of higher education.
The Methodological Framework of this study (i.e. small sample size).	Small sample sizes in qualitative research do not allow for the results to be generalised (Cohen et al., 2018).	A similar study should be conducted on a national level, employing a mixed method approach, to contribute to the generalisability of the research.

The recommendations for future research are discussed in more detail as follows:

- The current study revealed that conflicting accreditation outcomes result in decreased trust among the academics. In a study carried out by Garwe (2019), lack of coordination in the processes of EQA bodies where some granted accreditation status to a programme and some not, was reported. The latter was also supported by the NCHE (2019b) that is of the view that differences in programme accreditation outcomes reduce confidence in the credibility of EQA processes. As this issue did not form part of the focus of this investigation and thus could not be further examined, it is recommended that future research explores the impact of conflicting accreditation outcomes on higher education institutions, students, and EQA bodies.
- Some eminent scholars claim that IQA is the backbone of EQA. For instance, Martin (2018) held the view that IQA could steer EQA in the most effective ways and even stimulate synchronisation of EQA processes. Likewise, Matei and Iwinska (2016) claimed that well-coordinated IQA offices contribute to the successes of EQA. However, this study revealed that IQA offices, where they exist, are often neglected due to a lack of financial and human resources, including lack of support from management, as also found by Afolabi and Idowu (2019). It is, therefore, regarded important that an investigation be carried out on the importance of and support for IQA units in higher education institutions, as these offices fulfil a key support function when higher education institutions go through programme accreditation exercises.
- Another major concern was raised about the value external review panels add to improve the quality of programmes and the richness of detail they bring to the accreditation exercise. The current study found that review panels often tend to force their way of doing things in

their own countries on the higher education institutions whose programmes they assess, they are not acquainted with local QA systems, and they lack expertise in the area from which the programme under review stem. The studies done by PhillipsKPA (2017), and Torre and Zapata (2013) reported about similar concerns experienced with review panel members. It would be worthwhile to examine the efficiency of and the extent to which external review panels add value to IQA practices in higher education institutions, in general, and to the quality of programmes themselves and the accreditation process, in particular.

- The study found that irrespective of the existing overlaps, programme accreditation conducted by professional bodies is indubitably crucial, as the HPCNA and the ECN cover unique quality areas that the NCHE and NQA do not focus on during programme accreditation, the reason being that professional bodies conduct output-driven validation of programmes, while the EQAAs do input-driven accreditation. PhillipsKPA (2017) carried out an investigation on the extent and scope of the processes applied by professional bodies when accrediting programmes in higher education institutions in Australia. Considering the situation in terms of the overlapping accreditation roles of EQA bodies, a similar study could be carried out in the context of Namibia to determine the importance and value of professional body accreditation in Namibian higher education institutions.
- In this study, one of the suggestions to streamline the overlapping programme accreditation functions was to amend the respective Acts that established the NCHE, that is, the Higher Education Act 26 of 2003, and the NQA, namely the NQA Act 29 of 1996, as recommended in various consultancy reports (NCHE 2012; Shivor & Uupindi, 2008). However, the study also revealed that amending the Acts of the EQAAs could be a daunting

task as observed in the attempts made by the NCHE to have proposed amendments to the Higher Education Act approved being delayed for years now. The literature reviewed revealed some gaps with regards to the amendment of legislations for the purpose of streamlining the duplication of functions among EQA bodies. The limited scope of this small-scale qualitative investigation could not provide the desired depth concerning the amendment of legislations for the betterment of EQA systems and processes. Hence, future studies could explore the need for amending the legislations of EQAAs to streamline overlapping EQA roles and functions. Such studies should investigate possible impediments to the amendment of laws and seek the perceptions and views of the government, EQA bodies, and higher education institutions to shed more light on this complicated issue.

- This study also proposed a merger between the NCHE and the NQA. Bailey and Chirwa (2014) reported about the joining of EQA bodies to achieve increased efficiency in EQA systems and practices. Continuous monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of such mergers are important, hence future research could explore the successes and challenges of merging EQA bodies to inform evidence-based policy development and reviews in higher education QA.
- The current study proposed a plan of action to address the overlapping programme accreditation functions by integrating the Conceptual Model of Quality and the Deming PDCA Cycle, i.e. ‘The PDCA Quality Conceptual Model’, to ensure fitness for purpose in the execution of the QA mandates of the NQA, NCHE, HPCNA, and ECN. The Conceptual Model of Quality and the Deming PDCA Cycle are often used to modify and improve EQA and IQA systems and processes in higher education (Eby, 2019; Maruyama & Inoue, 2016;

Mergen et al., 2014; Taber et al., 2020). Future research could build on this exemplar PDCA Quality Conceptual Model to establish the effectiveness of combining conceptual frameworks for QA in enhancing the quality of higher education.

- The limited scope and small sample size of this qualitative case study provides an opportunity for the scope of the study to be expanded to strengthen the results and make the research more generalisable. Future research could be conducted on a national level, adopting a mixed method approach by employing surveys and focus groups or individual interviews, and include the management and heads of EQA bodies as well as the management of higher education institutions. The themes identified in this study could be used to generate survey scales. Such study may allow for more comprehensive data to be gathered and a more balanced outcome that could be utilised for further policy development and/or reviews in EQA in higher education.

This study was triggered by the researcher's interest to investigate the perceived overlapping functions of Namibia's EQA bodies and their effect on higher education institutions. This situation originated from the establishment of multiple EQA bodies, all of them being mandated to conduct various EQA activities such as the accreditation of programmes offered by higher education institutions as well as auditing or accrediting these institutions. Consequently, it resulted in a duplication of programme accreditation processes carried out by the NCHE, NQA, and HPCNA. This duplication of functions led to a wastage of government and institutional resources. In addition, it put a lot of strain on higher education institutions. This study yielded significant results which could assist various role players in QA in higher education in Namibia to minimise and/or eliminate the overlapping programme accreditation functions. These findings could:

- Serve as an eye-opener and advice to lawmakers and policy developers in the government on the impact that the overlapping programme accreditation functions of the EQA bodies have on the higher education institutions, and the potential opportunities provided to rectify and improve the situation. Furthermore, the results of this investigation may inform and expedite the amendment of the Higher Education Act 26 of 2003. The results may also motivate lawmakers to critically evaluate the Engineering Professions Bill 2019 and seek the best possible way forward to deal with the proposed amendments.
- Inform and further encourage the EQA bodies to thresh out the existing overlaps among themselves for greater coordination, efficiency, and achievement of their assigned mandates to reduce the burden on the higher education institutions.
- Create a better understanding for the higher education institutions about the roles and functions of the EQA bodies and increase their appreciation of the efforts made by the EQA bodies to enhance the quality of their programmes and related support services and facilities.
- Inform the crafting of policy briefs for wider public distribution to sensitise and educate the community about the work done by the NCHE, NQA, HPCNA, and ECN.

The next section presents the conclusions of the study.

Conclusions

This study adopted a qualitative case study approach to assess the perceived overlapping functions of Namibia's EQA bodies and their effect on higher education institutions. The researcher's interest to carry out this investigation stemmed from the situation in which Namibia's higher education institutions, i.e. NUST and IUM, in this case, found themselves with their programmes being accredited by multiple EQA bodies, which were the NQA, NCHE, HPCNA

and ECN. The findings of this research revealed that the programme accreditation functions of these bodies indeed overlap to a very large extent, with the largest overlaps having been between the NQA and the NCHE, while the NCHE and the HPCNA demonstrated overlaps to a lesser extent.

With reference to the QA functions assigned to these bodies, the NCHE is the only body that is legally charged with the accreditation of programmes offered by higher education institutions. The NQA, on the other hand, is in fact mandated to conduct institutional accreditation, but while auditing the institutions, it simultaneously accredits their programmes. The ECN does not conduct programme accreditation at this stage, as it is not mandated by the Engineering Profession Amendment Act 25 of 1991 to do such. Likewise, the Allied Health Professions Act 7 of 2004 does not mandate the HPCNA to do programme accreditation; however, the HPCNA inspects and accredits the facilities of higher education institutions, meaning they engage in the same programme accreditation processes as the NQA and the NCHE. In addition, the NQA, NCHE, and HPCNA use similar programme accreditation criteria that contributed further to the duplications, which have severe implications for the higher education institutions. Furthermore, the revelation about the ECN that was in the process of amending the Engineering Profession Amendment Act 25 of 1991 to add programme accreditation as one of its functions could imply more complications for and demands on higher education institutions that already struggle to meet the requirements of all these EQA bodies.

With regards to the overlapping functions between the EQA bodies, the results revealed major overlaps between the responses of the academics and the QA and Accreditation officers, which confirmed the intricacy of and the need to deal with the situation as a matter of urgency.

These results also reiterated the findings of previous research, done on similar topics, to a large extent (Friedman et al., 2017; McCurry, 2018; PhillipsKPA, 2017).

The results of this study proposed six themes in terms of the overlapping functions and their effect on higher education institutions: (a) functions of EQA bodies; (b) views about overlaps; (c) effects of perceived overlapping functions; (d) benefits of programme accreditation; (e) challenges for higher education institutions; and (f) suggestions for improvement.

Participants' views on the apparent overlapping functions affirmed the perceptions held by higher education institutions, the EQA bodies as well as other stakeholders in higher education that there are major duplications in and no clear demarcation of the roles and functions of especially the NQA and the NCHE. This also seems to cause a sense of rivalry between these two EQAAs that are supposed to complement each other. These overlapping functions impact the higher education institutions in various ways, both positively and negatively, with the negative effects outweighing the positive effects.

On the positive side, the study revealed that the institutions are motivated to earmark sufficient funds for programme accreditation to ensure their programmes pass these evaluations. The academics are increasingly encouraged to try their level best to offer their students a quality learning experience by ensuring they remain updated with the latest advancements in the subjects they are teaching. In addition, the motivational effect of programme accreditation led to the institutions paying more attention to the enhancement of IQA such as the establishment of IQA offices and the upgrading of examination and moderation systems, which ultimately resulted in increased trust among stakeholders in the programmes and services offered by these institutions. These findings altogether portray the conceptualisation of quality as exceptional, accountable, and transformative.

On the downside, these overlapping programme accreditation functions proved to be very demanding on the higher education institutions in terms of resources – human, financial, and time. It also puts a lot of strain on academics, cause increased workloads and accreditation fatigue, interfere with teaching duties, and cause delays in rolling out programmes. There is also no alignment between the accreditation periods of the EQA bodies, causing the higher education institutions to constantly prepare for site visits and the requirements associated with such visits, e.g., preparing ‘piles and piles’ of the same evidence documents for different EQA bodies. The uncertainty of accreditation outcomes from different EQA bodies also cause feelings of anxiety and fear among academics.

Furthermore, it came to light that some panel members are biased and tend to impose their ideas or practices that they use in their own countries on these higher education institutions in Namibia. In some instances, the accreditation outcomes could be jeopardised by some review panel members who seem to lack expertise in the field of study. This finding confirmed previous research that reported about review panel members in Africa that frequently lack expertise in the programmes submitted for accreditation (Atibuni, 2020). Subsequently, the latter results in decreased trust in accreditation outcomes. Unlike the researcher’s expectations about a possible negative impact that the demands of the overlapping programme accreditation functions may have on the research time of the academics and institutional autonomy, as reported by Friedman et al. (2017) and PhillipsKPA (2017), the findings in the current study did not reveal such.

The study also revealed some benefits of programme accreditation such as that it enhances the quality and trustworthiness of programmes and institutions and so ensure public trust and confidence in the institutions’ academic offerings and services; creates benchmarking and networking opportunities for the institutions; and heightens the mobility of students and the

credibility and employability of graduates. These benefits of programme accreditation were found in numerous studies (Atibuni, 2020; Berse, 2018; Bishoff, 2018; Dicker et al., 2018; Friedman et al., 2017; PhillipsKPA, 2017; Simukungwe, 2018).

Despite the positive effects and benefits of the overlapping programme accreditation functions reported in the current study, several internal and external challenges that the higher education institutions encounter was also found. The internal challenges include an overall lack of human and financial resources that cause the institutions to often not be able to meet the accreditation requirements of the various EQA bodies. A dearth of and/or inadequately resourced IQA offices, and failure to prioritise the upskilling of QA staff or to attend to excessive work overloads, were also found to be a challenge. Moreover, a concern was raised about the negative attitudes of some academics towards accreditation who view the exercise as a simple compliance check instead of as one of the activities that contributes to continuous quality improvement. Poor management support was also expressed as a concern that hampers the ability of the institutions to meet accreditation requirements, or to adequately address accreditation conditions or recommendations.

Concerning the external challenges faced by the higher education institutions, there was general concern about a lack of communication between the institutions and the EQA bodies, and a lack of cooperation among the EQA bodies. The EQA bodies do not make concerted efforts to educate the higher education institutions about their roles and functions, including QA issues in general, which pose additional challenges for the institutions to satisfy their requirements. There are also no formal systems or procedures in place for higher education institutions to appeal against unfair or contradicting programme accreditation outcomes, should the need arise. Another critical challenge that came to the fore was that streamlining of the programme accreditation processes

appear to be problematic provided that the NQA, NCHE, HPCNA, and ECN were established by Acts of Parliament that need to be considered, and the accreditation and validation criteria for the endorsement of programmes focus on different quality aspects.

This investigation adopted two conceptual frameworks commonly used in QA in higher education, namely the Conceptual Model of Quality and the Deming PDCA Cycle. The researcher is satisfied that the results of this study align very well with these frameworks, which confirm the successful use of the Conceptual Model of Quality and the Deming PDCA Cycle for the amendment and enhancement of quality in higher education.

Lastly, the findings of this study suggested several improvements to address the overlapping programme accreditation functions that presented the opportunity to design a proposed plan of action that could be used by relevant government authorities, the EQA bodies, the higher education institutions as well as various other stakeholders in higher education for deliberation, endorsement, and implementation. The proposed plan of action is based on ‘The PDCA Quality Conceptual Model’, which is a combination of the Deming PDCA Cycle and the Conceptual Model of Quality. In summary, the plan of action proposes the following recommendations:

- The roles and functions of the EQA bodies should be clarified.
- The professional bodies should accredit professional programmes.
- The programme accreditation processes and standards of these EQA bodies should be synchronised.
- The NCHE and the NQA should be merged.
- Review panels should be adequately trained.
- The EQA bodies and the higher education institutions should communicate regularly.

- Effective appeals systems should be established and implemented.
- The management and staff of the higher education institutions should be orientated on the importance of QA.

In conclusion, the results and conclusions of this study also provide opportunities for subsequent or future research. Among other, the fact that the QA discourse in higher education, globally, is generic in nature provides a strong possibility for the study to be replicated which may support the results and make the research more generalisable. The researcher believed that this study was conducted timely, as it could inform and unclog the way for the EQA bodies to thresh out the existing overlaps among themselves to reduce the burden on the higher education institutions. It could also assist lawmakers in the higher education sector to seek the best possible solutions to deal with and rectify the overlapping programme accreditation functions and/or processes of the NQA, NCHE, and HPCNA. The significance of conducting a study of this nature was welcomed by the heads of the NQA, NCHE, and HPCNA as well as the participants as shown by the findings.

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doi:10.4304/tpls.3.2.254-262

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Research Ethics Committee Provisional Approval



UREC's Decision

Student's Name: Anneley Willemse

Student's ID #: R1810D6534877

Supervisor's Name: Dr Charles B. W. Prince

Program of Study: UUZ: EdD Doctoral of Education

Offer ID /Group ID: O20265G20176

Dissertation Stage: 1

Research Project Title: Perceived Overlapping Functions of Namibia's External Quality Assurance Bodies and Their Effect on Higher Education Institutions

Comments: Correct the Student ID: R1810D6534877

Decision: B. Approved with comments for minor revision

Date: 08-Oct-2020

Appendix B: Research Ethics Committee Final Approval

UREC Decision, Version 2.0

**Unicaf University Research Ethics Committee
Decision****Student's Name:** Anneley Willemse**Student's ID #:** R1810D6534877**Supervisor's Name:** Dr Charles B. W. Prince**Program of Study:** UU-EDUD-900-3-ZM**Offer ID /Group ID:** O31442G32599**Dissertation Stage:** DS 3**Research Project Title:** Perceived overlapping functions of Namibia's external quality assurance agencies and their effect on higher education institutions**Comments:** No comments**Decision*:** A. Approved without revision or comments**Date:** 31-Mar-2022

*Provisional approval provided at the Dissertation Stage 1, whereas the final approval is provided at the Dissertation stage 3. The student is allowed to proceed to data collection following the final approval.

Appendix C: Sample of Non-completed Informed Consent Form



UU_IC - Version 2.1

Informed Consent Form

Part 1: Debriefing of Participants

Student's Name: Anneley Marita Willemse

Student's E-mail Address: awillemse@nust.na

Student ID #: R1810D6534877

Supervisor's Name: Dr Charles B. W. Prince

University Campus: Unicaf University Zambia (UUZ)

Program of Study: UUZ: EdD Doctoral of Education

Research Project Title: Perceived Overlapping Functions of Namibia's External Quality Assurance Bodies and Their Effect on Higher Education Institutions

Date: 20-Dec-2021

Provide a short description (purpose, aim and significance) of the research project, and explain why and how you have chosen this person to participate in this research (maximum 150 words).

The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceived overlapping functions (with a particular focus on programme accreditation) of Namibia's external quality assurance bodies, i.e. the NQA, NCHE, HPCNA and ECN, and the possible effect on Namibia's higher education institutions. The study thus aims to establish what functions the NQA, NCHE, HPCNA and ECN are mandated to undertake by law; explore the views of the higher education institutions, NQA, NCHE, HPCNA and ECN concerning the perceived overlaps; and establish the effects of these overlapping functions on Namibia's higher education institutions. The researcher intends to propose a model in an effort to streamline programme accreditation functions, and that may be cost-effective and efficient in terms of time, financial and human resources. The participants of this study were selected on the basis of their involvement in programme accreditation at the chosen universities, QAAs and professional bodies.

The above named Student is committed in ensuring participant's voluntarily participation in the research project and guaranteeing there are no potential risks and/or harms to the participants.

Participants have the right to withdraw at any stage (prior or post the completion) of the research without any consequences and without providing any explanation. In these cases, data collected will be deleted.

All data and information collected will be coded and will not be accessible to anyone outside this research. Data described and included in dissemination activities will only refer to coded information ensuring beyond the bounds of possibility participant identification.

I, Anneley Marita Willemse, ensure that all information stated above is true and that all conditions have been met.

Student's Signature: Anneley M. Willemse



UU_IC - Version 2.1

Informed Consent Form

Part 2: Certificate of Consent

This section is mandatory and should to be signed by the participant(s)

Student's Name: Anneley Marita Willemse

Student's E-mail Address: awillemse@nust.na

Student ID #: R1810D6534877

Supervisor's Name: Dr Charles B. W. Prince

University Campus: Unicaf University Zambia (UUZ)



Program of Study: UUZ: EdD Doctoral of Education

Research Project Title: Perceived Overlapping Functions of Namibia's External Quality Assurance Bodies and Their Effect on Higher Education Institutions

I have read the foregoing information about this study, or it has been read to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and discuss about it. I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions and I have received enough information about this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw from this study at any time without giving a reason for withdrawing and without negative consequences. I consent to the use of multimedia (e.g. audio recordings, video recordings) for the purposes of my participation to this study. I understand that my data will remain anonymous and confidential, unless stated otherwise. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study.

Participant's Print name:

Participant's Signature:

Date:

If the Participant is illiterate:

I have witnessed the accurate reading of the consent form to the potential participant, and the individual has had an opportunity to ask questions. I confirm that the aforementioned individual has given consent freely.

Witness's Print name:

Witness's Signature:

Date:

Appendix D: Interview Guide for Higher Education Institutions

Participants: Deputy Deans for Teaching and Learning and Head of Departments and/or Programme Coordinators

Dear Participants,

Your willingness to participate in this study is highly appreciated. There is a general perception amongst higher education institutions (HEIs) that the functions of Namibia's external quality assurance (EQA) bodies overlap. This study aims to gather the views of faculty members about the perceived overlapping functions (with a focus on programme accreditation) of the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE), Namibia Qualifications Authority (NQA), Engineering Council of Namibia (ECN) and the Health Professions Council of Namibia (HPCNA), and their effects on HEIs.

Please note that your participation in this interview is voluntary and you may withdraw from this study at any time. If you choose to continue with this interview, kindly complete and return the informed consent form. Your responses and personal information will be treated absolutely confidential. This interview consists of closed- and open-ended questions, and will last approximately 45 minutes. Please note that the interview will be conducted either via Microsoft Teams/Zoom in adherence to the COVID-19 regulations. All interviews will be recorded, with your permission, transcribed and returned to you for verification/member checking. The findings from this interview will be used to evaluate the perceived overlapping programme accreditation functions of the NCHE, NQA, ECN and HPCNA, and their effects on HEIs, and subsequently propose a model in an attempt to streamline the programme accreditation functions of Namibia's EQA bodies.

Section A: Demographic Information of Participants

1. Gender

2. How old are you?

3. What is your job title?

4. In which Faculty and Department are you working?

Section B: General Information

1. Have you been involved in a programme accreditation exercise before and in what capacity?

2. Which external quality assurance bodies accredit your institution's/faculty's programmes?

Section C: This section is divided into three categories guided by the main research questions and further sub-divided into sub-questions.

Category 1: Functions of External Quality Assurance Bodies

1. How do you understand the functions of the:

- a) Namibia Qualifications Authority?
- b) National Council for Higher Education?
- c) Health Professions Council of Namibia?
- d) Engineering Council of Namibia?

2. What are the processes involved in the accreditation of programmes by these external quality assurance bodies?

Category 2: Views about the Seemingly Overlapping Functions

3. What is your take on the multiple quality assurance bodies in Namibia?

4. Can you comment on the general perception about the perceived overlapping functions of Namibia's external quality assurance bodies?

Category 3: Effects of External Quality Assurance on Higher Education Institutions

5. In your opinion, what are the effects of these external quality assurance bodies on Namibia's higher education institutions?

6. What are the challenges, for higher education institutions, associated with external programme accreditation?

7. Do you have any suggestions/advice on what could be done to streamline the programme accreditation processes of the various external quality assurance bodies?

Before we end this interview, do you perhaps have any final thoughts about any of the aspects we have discussed? Could I contact you via email or phone if I have any more questions?

Thank you very much for your time and participation in this interview.

Sources: Some of these questions are adapted from McCurry (2018), Friedman et al. (2017), and PhillipsKPA (2017).

Appendix E: Interview Guide for External Quality Assurance Bodies

Participants: Quality Assurance and Accreditation Officers

Dear Participant,

Your willingness to participate in this study is highly appreciated. There is a general perception amongst higher education institutions (HEIs) that the functions of Namibia's external quality assurance (EQA) bodies overlap. This study aims to gather the views of faculty members about the perceived overlapping functions (with a focus on programme accreditation) of the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE), Namibia Qualifications Authority (NQA), Engineering Council of Namibia (ECN) and the Health Professions Council of Namibia (HPCNA), and their effects on HEIs.

Please note that your participation in this interview is voluntary and you may withdraw from this study at any time. If you choose to continue with this interview, kindly complete and return the informed consent form. Your responses and personal information will be treated absolutely confidential. This interview consists of closed- and open-ended questions, and will last approximately 45 minutes. Please note that the interview will be conducted either via Microsoft Teams/Zoom in adherence to the COVID-19 regulations, if so required. All interviews will be recorded, with your permission, transcribed and returned to you for verification/member checking. The findings from this interview will be used to evaluate the perceived overlapping programme accreditation functions of the NCHE, NQA, ECN and HPCNA, and their effects on HEIs, and subsequently propose a model in an attempt to streamline the programme accreditation functions of Namibia's EQA bodies.

Section A: Demographic Information of Participants

1. Gender

2. How old are you?

3. What is your job title?

4. In which Department/Division are you working?

Section B: General Information

1. How many years of experience do you have in programme accreditation?

Section C: This section is divided into three categories guided by the main research questions and further sub-divided into sub-questions.

Category 1: Functions of External Quality Assurance Bodies

1. How do you understand the functions of your own Agency or Council in comparison with the:

- a) Namibia Qualifications Authority?
- b) National Council for Higher Education?
- c) Health Professions Council of Namibia?
- d) Engineering Council of Namibia?

2. What are the processes involved in the accreditation of programmes by these external quality assurance bodies?

Category 2: Views about the Seemingly Overlapping Functions

3. What is your take on the multiple quality assurance bodies in Namibia?

4. Can you comment on the general perception about the perceived overlapping functions of Namibia's external quality assurance bodies?

Category 3: Effects of External Quality Assurance on Higher Education Institutions

5. In your opinion, what are the effects of the overlapping functions of these external quality assurance bodies on Namibia's higher education institutions?

6. Can you comment on the challenges higher education institutions encounter when your Agency/Council conducts programme accreditation/validation at these institutions?

7. Can you comment on the benefits for higher education institutions when your Agency/Council conducts programme accreditation/validation at these institutions?

8. Do you have any suggestions/advice on what could be done to streamline the programme accreditation processes of the various external quality assurance bodies?

Before we end this interview, do you perhaps have any final thoughts about any of the aspects we have discussed? Could I contact you via email or phone if I have any more questions?

Thank you very much for your time and participation in this interview.

Sources: Some of these questions are adapted from McCurry (2018), Friedman et al. (2017), and PhillipsKPA (2017).