Discursive constructions of quality assurance: The case of the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education

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By

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Thesis Abstract

Quality assurance is on the contemporary agenda in higher education and has been prioritised across the globe. It has been conspicuous through the emergence of numerous quality assurance bodies, and in Zimbabwe, where this study takes place, the government has constituted the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education. This study aims to identify the discourses drawn on by academics and those working within Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education to construct the roles and processes of external quality assurance practices in universities in Zimbabwe. The study was grounded on the premise that external quality assurance processes in higher education can vary according to their contextual environment. Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis as a method driven theory not only provided a methodology, a way of collecting and analysing my data, but it was also a substantive theory, which provided a particular way of understanding the world through discourse. Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis is grounded in a Critical Realist view of the social world that enabled generalisations about the effect discourse was having on the phenomenon of interest: quality assurance in higher education. One-to-one and group interviews were used to yield exploratory, descriptive and explanatory data. To corroborate and augment data from interviews, key documents related to quality assurance in universities in Zimbabwe and obtained from the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education were analysed. There were a number of profound discourses that emerged in the research study. There was a discourse of 'control' in which Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education put in place compliance mechanisms, setting minimum requirements for universities to offer 'credible' higher education. There was a discourse of 'power struggle' in which universities endeavoured to maintain their institutional autonomy in response to what was perceived as Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education's requirement of compliance. In the context of higher education in Zimbabwe, an important implication of the study was evident in the discourse of 'gold standard' of quality assurance which assumed that quality entails a generic best practice but which fails to take context into account. While a generic 'global' notion of best practice in quality assurance was dominant in the discourses of quality identified in this study, there were other discourses that focused on what quality might look like within the resource constraints of the context. The study highlighted the importance of collegiality between quality assurance organisations and universities to realise success of quality assurance intentions.

Key words: higher education; quality; quality assurance; Zimbabwe; Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education; discourse; Critical Discourse Analysis; Critical Realism.

DEDICATION

Dedicated to my late loving mum Emily for her compassion to educate me. May her soul rest in eternal peace.

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Finally, I regret any omission I may have made expressing my gratitude as this can only be construed as an unintended error and not ingratitude.

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 3.1 Bhaskar's three strata of reality 29

Figure 4.1 Definitions of quality 45

Figure 4.2 The IQA cycle in some universities.....61

Figure 4.3 Quantitative and qualitative measures of quality in QA.....72

Figure 5.1 Three dimensional framework for analysing discourse.....100

Figure 5.2 Textual context in CDA.....102

Figure 5.3 Data collection process, analysis and presentation.....106

Figure 6.1 Frequency in the use of 'standards' in interviews.....109

Figure 7.1 Frequency of reference to discourse of autonomy by participants. 130

Figure 7.2 Frequency of the discourse of sustenance in terms of funding.....137

Figure 7.3 Participants who expressed fear in ZIMCHE-universities relationship.....143

LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1 HEIs and enrolment in Zimbabwe.....9

Table 3.1 Bhaskar' critical realist strata with examples from the HE sector.....31

Table 5.1 Interviews and participants in data collection.....95

Table 5.2 Data collection procedure.....96

Table 5.3 List of documents that were obtained from ZIMCHE.....97

Table 5.4 Procedures to achieve the CDA study and the research question.....98

LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CHE	Council on Higher Education
CR	Critical Realism
CUT	Chinhoyi University of Technology
EEC	European Economic Community
EQA	External Quality Assurance
ESAP	Economic Structural Adjustment Programme
GZU	Great Zimbabwe University
HEI(s)	Higher Education Institution(s)
HE	Higher Education
IQA	Internal Quality Assurance
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MSU	Midlands State University
NUST	National University of Science and Technology
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
QA	Quality Assurance
UZ	University of Zimbabwe
ZANU-PF	Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front
ZIMCHE	Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education
ZOU	Zimbabwe Open University

Contents

Thesis Abstract II
DEDICATION III
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS IV
LIST OF FIGURES V
LIST OF TABLES VI
LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS VII
Chapter 1 1
Introduction: Research background 1
1.2 Rationale for the study 3
1.3 Objective, scope and significance of the study 3
1.4 The context of the study 4
1.5 Overview of thesis and chapter outline 5
Chapter 2 7
Higher education in Zimbabwe 7
2.1 Introduction 7
2.2 The Zimbabwean context 7
2.2.1 Overview of education system 7
2.2.2 HE institutional growth 8
2.2.3 Governance of the universities 10
2.3 QA in HE in Zimbabwe 12
2.3.1 ZIMCHE 12
2.3.2 The economic situation and HE 16
2.3.3 Funding of HE 17
2.3.4 Human and infrastructural resources in universities 20
2.3.5 Economic policy and HE 21
2.3.6 Tuition fees in HE 22
2.3.7 Support for students in difficult circumstances 24
2.3.8 Alternative institutional resourcefulness 26
2.4 Conclusion 27
Chapter 3 28
Theoretical underpinnings of the study 28
3.1 Introduction 28

3.2 The ontological position of the study: critical realism....28
3.3 Stratified ontology....29
3.3.1 Stratum of the empirical....31
3.3.2 Stratum of the actual....32
3.3.3 Stratum of the real....33
3.4 Discourses....35
3.4.1 The implications of discourses....37
3.5 Open and closed systems....38
3.6 Generative mechanisms....40
3.7 Immanent critique....41
3.8 Conclusion....43
Chapter 4....44
Quality assurance in Higher Education....44
4.1 The quality debate in higher education....44
4.1.1 Discourse of quality as *exceptional*....45
4.1.2 Discourse of quality as *perfection* (or consistency)....48
4.1.3 Discourse of quality as *fitness for/of purpose*....49
4.1.4 Quality as *value for money*....53
4.1.5 Quality as *transformation*....54
4.1.6 Quality as *culture*....56
4.1.7 Overview of the quality debate....57
4.2 Quality assurance [QA] mechanisms....58
4.2.1 Accountability....58
4.2.2 Control....59
4.2.3 Improvement or enhancement....59
4.2.4 Compliance....59
4.3 Internal quality assurance....60
4.3.1 Reasons for IQA....60
4.3.2 Conducting IQA....64
4.3.3 Challenges of IQA....65
4.4 External quality assurance [EQA]....66
4.4.1 Reasons for the emergence of EQA....67
4.4.2 Conducting EQA....70

4.5 Data as measures of quality in QA 71
4.5.1 Quality of academics 73
4.5.2 Quality of physical structures 75
4.5.3 Use of ICT in HE 76
4.5.4 Quality of institutional governance 78
4.5.5 Quality of financial resources 79
4.5.6 Quality of rapport 81
4.5.7 Quality of graduates 81
4.5.8 Quality research production 82
4.5.9 Programme completion and drop-out rates 83
4.6 Concluding remarks 83
Chapter 5 85
Methodology 85
5.1 Introduction 85
5.2 Fairclough's CDA as a research method 85
5.3 Discourses 86
5.4 The implications of discourses 88
5.5 Data collection 89
5.5.1 Gate-keeper's permission 89
5.5.2. Data collection process 90
5.5.3 Interview guide 90
5.5.4 Focus group discussions and interview processes 91
5.5.5 Research participants 92
5.5.6 Documents as sources of data 95
5.5.7 Organising data 98
5.6 Fairclough's CDA as an analytical tool 99
5.6.1 Data analysis 99
5.7 Ethical considerations 104
5.8 Drawing conclusions 105
5.9 Conclusion 106
Chapter 6 107
Conceptualisation of quality in higher education in Zimbabwe 107
6.1 Introduction 107

6.2 The 'quality' discourse in HE 107
6.2.1 The discourse of quality as standards 108
6.2.2 The perfection or consistency discourse 118
6.2.3 Discourse of quality as fitness of purpose 120
6.2.4 The discourse of value for money 122
6.2.5 The transformation discourse 124
6.3 Conclusion 125
Chapter 7 127
Discourses related to ZIMCHE and universities relationship 127
7.1 Introduction 127
7.2 Discourse of autonomy 127
7.3 Discourse of sustenance 136
7.4 The discourse of fear 142
7.5 Discourse of contempt 146
7.6 The discourse of confidence 147
7.7 Conclusion 149
Chapter 8 151
Discourses related to ZIMCHE policy 151
8.1 Discourse of compliance 151
8.2 Discourse of control 153
8.3 Discourse of 'gold standard' 156
8.4 Conclusion 164
Chapter 9 165
Conclusion 165
9.1 Introduction 165
9.2 Research focus 165
9.3 Contribution and significance of study to research in higher education 166
9.3.1 Multiplicity of discourses of quality 166
9.3.2 The 'gold standard' discourse 168
9.3.3 Relationship discourses 171
9.3.4 Discourses of policy in quality assurance 174
9.4 Further study 176
9.5 Conclusion 176

REFERENCES 178
LIST OF DOCUMENTS 210
Document 1: Application for permission to collect data 210
Document 2: HE Ministry letter of permission to collect data 212
Document 3: Informed Consent for Interview 213
Document 4: Interview schedule for ZIMCHE and academic staff members 214
Document 5: Document analysis guide 215
OTHER DOCUMENTS OBTAINED FROM ZIMCHE 216

Chapter 1

Introduction: Research background

1.1 Background to the study

Quality has been placed squarely on the contemporary agenda in higher education (henceforth, HE) (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2005). HE in the developing world has not lagged behind either as quality assurance has also been prioritised on the educational agenda (Kis, 2005). This focus on quality assurance has been brought about by various motives (factors which relate to the regional and global scene). For HE institutions, quality assurance requires them to demonstrate responsibility in their professional practices, to be accountable for public funds received and to demonstrate the results they achieve with the available resources (Jackson, 1998). Quality issues became more important because policy makers wanted to know if their funds are spent in a correct and efficient manner (Bernhard, 2009). In addition to that, as many countries have resorted to tuition fees as a means of augmenting the available resources, the notion has been that 'those who benefit should at least share in the costs' (Johnstone, 2003:4). This implies that the beneficiaries of publicly-funded goods (like HE) should contribute (if they can) as individuals by paying tuition fees. This group of fee payers also need to be assured that they are getting 'value for money'.

The need for greater accountability is usually driven by scarce resources. Providers of HE usually find themselves operating in an increasingly competitive environment (Mok, 2005). In some contexts there was also a need to 'develop quality in the face of the rapid expansion of higher education systems' (Quinn & Boughey, 2009:263), with some countries realising an increased number of private (including 'for profit') HE institutions. Johnstone (2003) has observed that internationally it has been the massive increase in student enrolment accompanied by diversification of the system that has triggered concerns for the potential decline of quality of education in universities.

Due to all the above cited reasons, it became imperative that the quality of HE be monitored in order to at least show commitment to continuous improvements (de Jager & Gbadamosi, 2010) with most external quality assurance agencies having been established as government initiatives (UNESCO, 2011) for the purpose of 'controlling and improving quality' in HE (Stensaker, 2007:106) in addition to ensuring 'public accountability of the use of public funds … contributed through the introduction of external monitoring and assessment' (Gordon, 2002:98-

99). In a nutshell, quality assurance can basically be summed up as meant for two purposes: accountability and improvement[1]. This has also been conspicuous in developing countries with the emergence of numerous quality assurance bodies (Lim, 1999). In fact, the number of quality assurance agencies has grown around the world (*University World News*, 2012) with almost every country in the world adopting an external evaluation system for HE (van Kemende, Pupius & Hardjono, 2008). Shabani (2013) has noted that, by 2012, twenty-one African countries had established external quality assurance agencies, while many others were at advanced stages in forming many such agencies. In Zimbabwe there used to be a decentralised system for quality assurance in universities, with quality assessment and control largely left to individual universities. In recent years the emergence of new universities stimulated a need to complement the internal institutional mechanisms with a national system (Shizha & Kariwo, 2011).

With a rapid growth (in HE), Schwarz and Westerheijden (2004) argue, some governments develop a concern about accountability, hence a focus on quality assurance in HE and the formation of organs to oversee appropriate adherence. In some countries quality assurance systems have 'evolved principally as methods of assessing the performance of institutions' (Barnett, 1992:52). In the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries more than sixty members have established their own national quality assurance systems over the last fifteen years in the HE sector (Fang, 2010; El-Khawas, 2001).

In Zimbabwe student enrolment in HE rose from about 2,000 in 1989 to 78,481 in 2003 (Kariwo, 2007; UNESCO, 2004). The proliferation of universities coupled with some form of massification of HE in Zimbabwe was seen to raise a need for a centralised system of quality assurance. This resulted in the enactment of the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education Act of 2006, which subsequently led to the establishment of the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (henceforth, ZIMCHE) (Shizha & Kariwo, 2011). Brennan and Shar (2000) note that one of the objectives of public policies related to the quality bodies is to improve the quality of HE provision; ZIMCHE was precisely mandated to promote and co-ordinate education

[1] Accountability in quality assurance can be considered as a control mechanism. Trow (1996) defined accountability in higher education as the obligation to report, explain, and justify to others as well as to answer questions about how resources have been used, and to what effect. Improvement (sometimes also referred to as enhancement) is more about the encouragement of adjustment and change (Harvey, 2008) while it can also be reflected through exceeding stakeholders' expectations in HE provided.

provided by institutions of HE and to act as a regulator in the determination and maintenance of quality in HE institutions in Zimbabwe (Zimbabwe Government, 2006).

1.2 Rationale for the study

During my Master's study[2] on quality of teaching and learning in one university in Zimbabwe, the role of the ZIMCHE came to the fore in focus groups and interviews regarding its role and functions in quality assurance, an issue which was not within the scope of that thesis to research. Concern was raised with regard to the ZIMCHE role in quality assurance in HE and to issues of external quality assurance more generally.[3]

There have been allegations that despite Zimbabwe having the highest literacy rate in Africa (UNESCO, 2013) this reputation is being eroded due to the Ministry of Higher Education's approach to quality assurance in education (Monda, 2012). Recently, the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education advocated for a tougher stance by ZIMCHE when dealing with institutions of higher learning to realise quality in HE (*The Herald*, 2015). These perspectives, whilst not meaning to denigrate ZIMCHE activities, raised my interest in investigating the mechanisms which underlie ZIMCHE's work in quality assurance. As quality assurance in HE has become an international phenomenon, it is important to have studies that consider the implementation thereof within particular contexts. In this study, the Zimbabwe HE system will be focused on. On a wider spectrum there is need for studies on quality assurance processes broadly (in any country context) given the rapid shifts in how universities are understood and the growth in quality assurance mechanisms internationally.

1.3 Objective, scope and significance of the study

This research provides an in-depth understanding of the discourses that construct the ZIMCHE quality assurance processes. Since the inception of the ZIMCHE, no studies on the fledgling quality assurance processes in Zimbabwe have been undertaken while very few have been undertaken anywhere in the African context. My study aims to arouse organisational self introspection regarding its mandate, intentions and key contextual factors that mediate its

[2] Chidindi, J. (2012). *Revisiting Quality Issues in Higher Education: Teaching and Learning in Resource Quandary*. Master's in Higher Education: University of Oslo. Published by Saarbrucken: LAP Lambert Academic Publishing.

[3] For example shortages of adequate classroom space and ablution facilities that existed in the university prompted some participants to point at the ZIMCHE's lack of intervention as the overseer for quality in HE.

effectiveness as an organisation. My study therefore endeavours to create a new understanding of existing issues regarding ZIMCHE's quality assurance and to identify new and emerging issues worthy of further investigation and explanation of quality assurance in HE. Furthermore, this research study will enable a judgement of the nature and degree of changes concerning national quality assurance processes in similar quality assurance organisations elsewhere.

To this end I needed a theory that would provide a useful tool to examine ZIMCHE quality assurance within its context, i.e. a method driven theory. I determined that a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) would help me to make a detailed in-depth analysis of the ZIMCHE's behaviour in quality assurance, its roles and procedures and the way these have been discursively enacted and experienced by stakeholders. After foregrounding pragmatic analytical issues, Fairclough offers a practical methodology through CDA (Henderson, 2005). CDA in Chapter 3 proffers a release of plurality of textual meaning in quality assurance in HE and helps to conceptualise and problematise the multiple social and discursive constructions of quality assurance that were evident in the original data that I collected (Henderson, 2005). CDA therefore assists in setting out a 'suspicious inspection of how discourses shape and frame' (Toolan, 1997:83). Ultimately, it becomes possible to suggest a response to the question of whether or not external quality assurance bodies like ZIMCHE indeed promote more effective HE in Africa in general and in Zimbabwe in particular. This is so as a ZIMCHE case study permits an investigation of quality assurance explanations which enables potentially more productive approaches to quality assurance in HE.

1.4 The context of the study

The primary focus of the study is on Zimbabwe's HE macro (system) level through an in-depth study of mechanisms that underpin ZIMCHE quality assurance practices. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to focus on ZIMCHE processes without considering the responses of universities themselves. As ZIMCHE is responsible for quality assurance in universities in Zimbabwe, its role and functions are largely looked into on the basis of the circumstances that prevail in the universities. In my research, I first look at ZIMCHE (*macro* level) within the broader national and international context of the emergence of quality assurance – and then hone in on selected universities (*micro* level) and investigate how ZIMCHE's roles and practices are manifest within them. The secondary focus will therefore be some selected

universities, which will be used as cases to extrapolate the mechanisms that underpin the ZIMCHE enactment of its role in HE.

Since my study is a case study research, research questions are definable in terms of 'how' questions which can be explanatory in nature (Yin, 2014). The specific research question that guides this research study is: What are the discourses that construct ZIMCHE's role and quality assurance processes?

To address the main research question stated above, it is essential that the study considers some sub-research questions. The following are the sub-questions:

a) How is quality assurance constructed in the national policy and other pertinent documentation?
b) How has ZIMCHE implemented quality assurance as a series of events?
c) How has ZIMCHE experienced these events?
d) How have university academics experienced these events?

This study takes a critical realist ontological position, as reflected by the wording of these questions. This is discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

1.5 Overview of thesis and chapter outline

This thesis consists of nine chapters. Chapter 1 has the Introduction, that comprises of a background to the thesis. It deals mainly with the general overview of the emergence and purposes of quality assurance in HE, highlighting their origins in the sector from a global perspective. In the same chapter is found a brief discussion of quality assurance in HE in Zimbabwe and the birth of the ZIMCHE. The main research question and sub-research questions that guide the study are put forward. The justification of the study and its importance to the research are also found in this part of the thesis.

Since this is a case study, description of the HE trends in Zimbabwe are reviewed in Chapter 2. This comprises of the historical developments of HE in Zimbabwe. It is in this same chapter that the legal framework that regulates quality assurance in the HE sector in Zimbabwe is addressed. The birth and functions of the ZIMCHE are presented in this same chapter.

Chapter 3, 'Theoretical underpinnings of the study', is a presentation of the theories that underpin the thesis. First, Bhaskar's Critical Realism (henceforth, CR) ontology is presented as the ontological position that I adopt to understand the discursive construction of the ZIMCHE quality assurance. CR and its concepts are presented and discussed in relation to quality

assurance in HE. Since Fairclough's CDA was a substantive theory for the study, 'discourses' as mechanisms are discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 4 deals with quality assurance in HE, the contestations in the conceptualisations of quality, and the different approaches to quality assurarance in HE. In this chapter there is a focus on quality assurance issues at institutional and national levels which includes the different perspectives on those levels. In a nutshell, issues regarding the evolvement of quality assurance is addressed in this part of thesis.

Chapter 5 focuses on a methodological and analytical tool, Fairclough's CDA. Qualitative research approach and the case study are presented and discussed. Purposive sampling procedure that I use in the study for selecting the case and participants is also presented in this same part of thesis. Data collection methods, instruments and procedures are also pursued in the same section of the thesis. I discuss the interview, focus group and document analysis as the methods of collecting data in the study. Interview guides and documents as instruments that can be used to extract data are discussed. The procedures that I use to collect the data are also presented and discussed. The descriptive, interpretive and explanatory dimensions are presented and discussed in the relation to CDA notions.

In a research study, there are ethics that the researcher has to consider. I discuss the ethical considerations in the Methodology section. I also present my efforts to enhance quality in my study. Inevitably, there are challenges and limitations that can be encountered in any study. I present and discuss these in the same section.

Data analysis, based on discourses that construct the ZIMCHE quality assurance, is discussed Chapters 6, 7 and 8. I make sense out of raw data as I find, and also create and justify links between CDA and the collected data.

In Chapter 9 I finally give conclusions that emanate from the research findings of the study in Chapter 9.

Chapter 2

Higher education in Zimbabwe

2.1 Introduction

Not many people know about the history of education in Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe is also politically isolated and its story is seldom told in academia! This chapter provides a picture of higher education in Zimbabwe. A discussion of HE brings to the fore a picture of context in which a formal QA body can possibly operate.

2.2 The Zimbabwean context

2.2.1 Overview of education system

From 1890, when the European settlers arrived in the present day Zimbabwe, missionaries spread their influence among the indigenous people by first introducing formal education. Many mission schools still retain a strong religious affiliation (Kanyongo, 2005). UNESCO (2004) outlines Zimbabwe's education system as consisting of seven years of primary and six years of secondary schooling; children aged four to six attending pre-school, and beginning Grade 1 during the year in which they turn six. By 2002 the transition rate from primary to secondary school had risen astronomically from 12.5% to 70% due to an 'Education for All' policy (UNESCO, 2004).

Most students enter secondary school at the age of thirteen and complete lower secondary school (Forms one to four) at the age of sixteen. Also, most students complete upper secondary school (Forms five and six) at the age of eighteen after which they are eligible to enter into the HE sector. In the secondary school, compulsory subjects include History, Technical or Vocational subjects, English and one major indigenous language. To protect children from the HIV AIDS scourge, this topic is also part of the curriculum.

Schools also have to make provision for non-formal education to allow those who want to supplement failed Ordinary and Advanced level subjects to use their facilities, while most pupils who fail and need to supplement have to go to private colleges which offer the service a relatively high cost that most people cannot afford (The Herald, 2014).

With new 'Education for All' policies introduced at independence in 1980 there was an unprecedented increase in student enrolments (Shizha & Kariwo, 2011). The quantitative result has been that Zimbabwe has the highest literacy rate in Africa with the latest statistic showing that Zimbabwe has a 92% literacy rate (UNDP, 2013). Growth has been realised in university education too, about which this study is concerned.

2.2.2 HE institutional growth

HE in Zimbabwe refers to education offered in post-secondary institutions such as universities, polytechnics, teachers' colleges, and other units of different government ministries such as agricultural colleges (Shizha & Kariwo, 2011; Kotecha & Perold, 2013). However, in this chapter HE is regarded as education offered in universities, public or private.

From 1957 until 1991, there existed only a single university in Zimbabwe, the University of Zimbabwe [UZ][4] located in Harare (Kariwo, 2007) with a student population of only 2,240 in 1982 (Nherera, 2005). It was not until 1991 that the University of Science and Technology [NUST] was established in Bulawayo, the second largest city of Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe's HE sector has undergone a remarkable expansion since 1995 from only two public universities to a current sixteen universities, ten public and six private. The establishment of universities has spread across the country with at least one state university having been established in every province except in Manicaland where only a private university, Africa University, exists.

The first decade of independence was characterised by a phenomenal quantitative expansion in HE (Hwami, 2011) as Government recognised that higher education was a basic human right (Shizha & Kariwo, 2011). University enrolments shot from 11,784 in 1995 to 33,334 in 2001 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2003) to 55,000 in 2011 (Shizha & Kariwo, 2011). Thus from 1991 there was an attempt to move from an elite to a 'mass' HE system. For instance, in 1958 only 7% of students at the then University of Rhodesia were black, a quantity that has since risen sharply to 98% of the total university student enrolment (Shizha & Kariwo, 2011). Table 2.1 below[5] provides a summary of enrolment in some universities in Zimbabwe from 2010 to 2012.

[4] UZ was known as University College of Rhodesia affiliated to University of London from 1957 to 1970. Thereafter, until 1980 the institution became University of Rhodesia as a joint venture of Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) and Nyasaland (now Malawi). At independence in 1980, it finally became known as UZ.

[5] Some enrolment figures are unavailable, particularly for HEIs that have recently been established such as Reformed Church University and Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University.

Name of university	2010	2011	2012
¤Bindura University of Science and Technology	2116	4394	4732
¤Chinhoyi University of Technology	4533	4533	5124
¤Great Zimbabwe University	2671	4201	4481
¤Gwanda State University	#	#	#
¤Harare Institute of Technology	622	1245	1446
¤Lupane State University	521	862	1206
¤Midlands State University	10648	10258	14915
¤Nation University of Science and Technology	4057	7098	3087
¤University of Zimbabwe	7636	8310	11975
¤Zimbabwe Open University	15303	8568	8895
*Africa University	1566	1384	1701
*The Catholic University in Zimbabwe	385	387	437
*Reformed Church University	#	#	65
*Women's University	1537	1517	1472
*Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University	#	#	#
*Solusi University	1952	338	672
TOTALS	**53547**	**53095**	**60208**

Table 2.1: HEIs and enrolment in Zimbabwe (Available data sourced from: Zimbabwe National Statistical Agency, 2013).

No data available for the universities or the universities had not been established

* Private university

¤ Public university

As evidenced in Table 2.1 above, public universities still outnumber private universities (a total of ten public universities against six private universities). As is reflected in the enrolment figures the contribution by private universities is still relatively small, therefore at the moment private university contribution in HE is far less than that from the state universities. The establishment of more universities was influenced by the demand for HE hence there has been rapid growth of enrolment in universities, as reflected in the university establishments after 1991. There was a total enrolment of 60,208 in 2012. UZ could not absorb all the applicants for HE, which necessitated the establishment of more universities (Teferra, 2013). Public universities have not only outnumbered private universities but student numbers have also grown exponentially in the public universities (see Table 2.1). In this context of rapid growth in HE, quality needed to be monitored. An expanding higher education system as Zimbabwe was experiencing needed some form of monitoring of quality. Thus the State had to involve itself in governance issues in universities.

2.2.3 Governance of the universities

The role of the government in HE can be one of 'state supervision' whereby the state plays a major role in providing funds and direction on policy for HE (Neave & van Vught, 1991). This means that, through a state supervision model, policy making and planning mostly falls in the hands of government in general while at the same time monitoring the discernment of funds to ensure they are effectively and efficiently used by the public universities. These mechanisms of accountability are present not only to protect government interests but also to protect the public and the institutions. This is because the government tries to press more for an effective use of resources in the universities while the academic part is left to the universities. Thus to an extent the government's role can be that of university effectiveness and value for money. 'The government should ensure that the system serves the public interest, provides at least those elements of higher education that would not be supplied if left to the market, promotes equity, and supports those areas of basic research relevant to the country's need' (World Bank, 2000:53). Honing in to the context of Zimbabwe, Shizha and Kariwo (2011) analyse the government role in Zimbabwe. They indicate that the government was focused on funding higher education although there has been a growing burden in this. They also observe that although government financial resources are low at a time when inflation is at its highest, universities still rely on it for budgetary support.

In Zimbabwe the government has not entirely left universities to exercise full autonomy. There has been some incidence of government interference in the macro management of the universities in Zimbabwe. The relationship between the government and the universities is very loosely defined as that the Minister of Higher Education shall give direction in matters of policy (Kariwo, 2007). However, Acts of public universities and Charters of private universities in Zimbabwe define the role of the State in the governance of universities. Examples are the National University of Science and Technology Act of 1990 for the state owned NUST and the Great Zimbabwe University Charter for the Reformed Church University owned by the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe. The government has representatives who are appointed by the Ministry of Higher Education to sit on the university Councils. This can be regarded as the existence of an unusually high government presence in HE and quite a lot of government interference in the macro management of the universities in Zimbabwe. However, the argument is that the university Council is where executive authority on policy-making resides (Zimbabwe Government, 2006). In the university there is also the Senate that consists of academic staff and is chaired by the vice-chancellor. It is the Senate that oversees the academic policies and their operation. Practically, the day-to-day running of the university is the responsibility of the vice-chancellor and chancellor in the private universities respectively. They and their management teams such as deans of faculty and chairpersons of departments run the universities on a daily basis. It would seem that it is this administrative structure that oversees quality issues in the university on a day-to-day basis. It is crucial to note that this was mainly prevalent in the era before ZIMCHE was formed. It was a period in which every university oversaw its quality assurance issues internally (Garwe, 2014).

Since 2010, the universities in Zimbabwe have had full autonomy on issues of quality of HE with each university largely left to use their own methods (Kariwo, 2007). For instance, the policy is that universities determine their curricula. Universities use a combination of methods of assuring quality such as setting minimum entry points to select students and using external examiners. Senate ensures that programmes meet required standards, as well as ensuring that examination results are processed and published strictly according to set regulations and procedures (Shizha & Kariwo, 2011). This is by and large an internal quality assurance system. Public and private universities have both adopted this kind of approach (Shizha & Kariwo, 2011). Autonomy is also exercised when universities in Zimbabwe the academics and other members of staff of their choice as long as they regard them as qualified, without the interference from the government. Therefore, the role of government in the HE sector could

arguably be described as having been indirect until 2010 when Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education became active in assuring quality in universities. Despite the interest in the governance issues by the government, the same country has been facing immense economic challenges.

2.3 QA in HE in Zimbabwe

Materu (2007) notes that, with the effort to expand enrolment, graduates were poorly prepared for the work place and numerous higher education providers were entering the scene, so governments in Sub-Saharan Africa governments decided to put in place quality assurance agencies[6]. Some of the legal mandates of national QA agencies in Africa include authority to assess institutions and/or programmes, approve new programmes, and approve (or deny) the creation of new private universities (Materu & Righetti, 2010). With reference to Zimbabwe, with so many new universities in the country (see Table 2.1), it was seen to be necessary to complement the efforts of internal quality assurance mechanisms with external ones (Shizha & Kariwo, 2013) hence the establishment of ZIMCHE as a form of re-looking at quality assurance in university education (Garwe, 2014). I now turn to the establishment of Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE).

2.3.1 ZIMCHE

The Zimbabwe Council of Higher Education Act (2006) was promulgated to establish a central body that would register and accredit institutions of higher education and regulate quality assurance in them (University World News, 2009). In 2006, the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) was established as an independent body with the mandate to 'to sustain and guarantee quality … in university education by accrediting, monitoring and advancing quality at all universities in Zimbabwe' (Zimbabwe Government, 2006:1). This included the control and maintenance of quality in HEIs, advising the minister accordingly on matters regarding HE design, and recommending quality assurance systems in the HE sector (Zimbabwe Government, 2006). Other ZIMCHE mandates include visiting and inspecting HEIs as well as liaising with the government and HEIs on matters of policy and interest. ZIMCHE also acts as the adviser of the Minister of Higher and Tertiary Education on the establishment,

[6] Africa is incredibly diverse in its HE and QA due to its difference in history, culture and context of each country making comparison difficult. For example only sixteen African countries currently have functioning QA agencies (Materu, 2007).

maintenance and expansion of universities, to avoid deterioration of quality of HE in Zimbabwe (Zimbabwe Government, 2006). Garwe (2014) observes that ZIMCHE therefore advises the HE ministry in matters regarding accreditation of new higher education institutions and providing direction on policy matters. That is not an unusual mandate of quality assurance bodies worldwide as they are 'established to control, support and enhance' quality in institutions (Stensaker, 2007:196). In an effort to search for a model for quality in universities, the 2006 Act stresses the assurance of minimum standards in 'curriculum design, content and organization, teaching, learning and assessment, student progression and achievement, student support and guidance, learning resources, and quality assurance and enhancement' (Zimbabwe Government, 2006:5). ZIMCHE also carries out staff audits in the institutions to check, for example, on the number of professors or doctors an institution employs.

Although the HE Act was promulgated in 2006, ZIMCHE became operational only in 2009 when the ZIMCHE board members were appointed by the Minister of Higher and Tertiary Education. For ZIMCHE to spend so many years before it became operational could have been a reflection of challenges that the quality assurance body faced. It was a period when the country faced such serious hyperinflation that it was difficult for institutions to survive in terms of budgeting. The role of the minister in appointing the board members received criticism from some university staff members as this risked being run by political appointees, e.g. the 2006 then ruling party ZANU-PF conference passed a resolution calling for the expulsion from universities of lecturers that were critical of the government (University World News, 2009). In an environment where ministers are appointed based on political affiliation, the minister potentially ensures that politics also influence appointments in HEIs. Unsurprisingly, the then and now President Mugabe remarked way back at independence in 1980 that 'higher education is too important a business to be left entirely to deans, professors, lecturers and university administrators' (Chideya, Chikomba, Pongweni, & Tsikirayi, 1981:6). Now that most opposition politicians have emanated from universities, it implies that the State through ZIMCHE potentially controls political activities in universities. This can also mean that ZIMCHE's primary role of quality assurance can be overshadowed by control of political activities in universities.

Efforts to control political activities in universities may also imply that the birth of ZIMCHE raises the prospect of the curtailment of academic freedom especially in politically sensitive disciplines such as History (Coltart, 2009). ZIMCHE could therefore be easily be construed as an extension of the ruling party of the day due to the selection process of the board members,

leading to a possible compromise of academic freedom which may, given the political context of Zimbabwe, have particularly sinister, even life-threatening consequences. The academe feel intimidated by the Act while government critics may easily be purged. In fact, any dissenting voice critical of the government emanating from the academe has been perceived as the voice of the opposition and agents of the British, the former colonial masters, and other Western powers seeking a regime change in Zimbabwe (Hwami, 2014). This has been a common feature at African universities, where academe who dared to speak out against reigning governments have been censured and, in some cases, killed, and academic freedom has been severely curtailed (Sherman, 1990).

Fears of this kind may diminish success in self-critical analysis of the possible strategies to improve HE in a country in which any constructive criticism may be viewed as insincere advice from an enemy of the state. A ZANU-PF Information and Publicity Secretary for Bulawayo, Sikhumbuzo Ndiweni, notes that the ruling party ZANU-PF made caused universities to be 'turned into anti-Government mentality factories' (Ranger, 2004:218). Regrettably, many of the ZIMCHE board members are sympathisers of the same ruling party, which has cast doubt on the council's ability to sustain, guarantee and advance the quality of HE (Coltart, 2009). The way ZIMCHE members were selected was on the basis of seeing education as an extension of the party, (referring to the ZANU-PF party that has ruled the country since Zimbabwe gained independence in 1980).

According to the HE Act, if an institution or one of its degree programmes is not conforming to the quality and standards set, then ZIMCHE can close such an institution or stop the particular degree programme. In an effort to assure quality in HE, ZIMCHE indicated that any institution offering programmes that do not meet the standards set will be stopped from offering them, while every university lecturer must be in possession of a PhD by 2015 (Mashininga, 2012). Although the current percentage of PhDs is unavailable, increased availability of PhDs in Zimbabwe can be a difficult task to achieve as, in Southern Africa, 'the overall output of doctorate holders is very low' (Jørgensen, 2012:14). However, to show that ZIMCHE has control, *The Herald* (2011) report that the teaching of a Bachelor of Science in Counselling degree at ZOU was cancelled after the university failed to meet all the requirements needed for it to teach the degree due to its being substandard; and PhDs in business administration and African leadership development, and a medical degree programme offered by NUST were suspended as ZIMCHE deemed them to have failed to meet the requirements (Kotecha & Perold, 2013). Some diplomas were downgraded to certificates as the institutions offering the

qualification lacked sufficiently qualified personnel to offer instruction for those programmes. In a statement ZIMCHE warned people against taking up degree and other programmes with City Study Centre, Calvary University and Regent Business School as they were unregistered to offer degree programmes (*The Herald*, 2011). The institutions were not registered and therefore could not offer university degrees in Zimbabwe.

The ZIMCHE Act of 2006 states that the chancellor of the state universities, who is the President of the Republic of Zimbabwe, has the power to withdraw degrees and diplomas already conferred (at properly constituted convocations) and that the affected students should be forced to return to college and undergo remedial studies because ZIMCHE in retrospect was not happy with the quality of the said degrees and diplomas (Zimbabwe Government, 2006). However, this could be interpreted as ZIMCHE failing to carry out its mandate timeously. With ZIMCHE only finding any of the institutions to be 'dodgy' after the graduation has happened may reflect inability to be up-to-date with all quality issues in the universities. Retrospective removal of qualifications from those who have earned them can be unfair to the former students.

The HE Act states that there shall be 'three vice-chancellors appointed by the Minister to represent public and private institutions respectively' (Zimbabwe Government, 2006:1). The criteria for such a choice can potentially create tension among vice-chancellors. This may also enhance the fuelling of conflicts of interest, with higher education ministers often using the vice-chancellor of one university to evaluate and assess the performance of another vice-chancellor, in addition to the perception that those who sit on the ZIMCHE board perceive themselves as superior to those who do not sit on the board or committees. Admittedly, there can be personal envy, ambitions and rivalries among vice-chancellors with some having an axe to grind. However, ulterior motives in ZIMCHE can be dismissed as some decisions have proved to be ZIMCHE's as an organisation. For instance, in the suspension of ZOU's Master of Science and Bachelor of Science degrees in Counselling programmes discussed earlier, the whole narrative is intriguing as ZOU's vice-chancellor is a member of the current ZIMCHE Council which endorsed the decision to suspend the degree programmes, as Jongwe (2012) observes. Ironically, when it suspended ZOU degree programmes, ZOU director of marketing and communications Nhamo Marandu felt the suspension of the programmes was unprocedural and irregular, leaving its students and graduates in a quandary (*NewsDay*, 2014.). He challenged how ZIMCHE executed its mandate, alleging that the programmes had been suspended on an unclear basis as ZIMCHE should have published the results of the accreditation process, which

the regulatory body had not done. In the case of ZOU's Diploma in Education (Primary) that ZIMCHE suspended, at the time of the launch diploma study, neither the Permanent Secretary nor any authority in the Government Ministries was against the programme although they were present at the launch. It can be argued that quality issues have to be raised during the accreditation process instead of waiting until students graduate. ZIMCHE and the HEIs have to avoid situations that can discredit the organisations (*The Herald*, 2012). Or perhaps ZIMCHE has to take the advice from Blackmur (2007) that regulatory bodies should take one step back when starting to analyse what we perceive as quality problems.

ZIMCHE has also been criticised for failing to carry out its mandate transparently (Garwe, 2014). In addition to that ZIMCHE has also been challenged to reveal the qualifications of those who ZIMCHE assigns to evaluate programmes as there was an allegation that some evaluators were actually on the payrolls of other universities' competitors. In such a situation, naturally fairness may be compromised. However, legally involving interested parties in ZIMCHE QA processes is unavoidable as three vice-chancellors appointed by the Minister have to represent public and private institutions respectively (Zimbabwe Government, 2006). All these factors may have impacted on ZIMCHE's processes and activities in quality assurance in higher education, notwithstanding the economic situation in Zimbabwe.

2.3.2 The economic situation and HE

It is crucial to reflect on the economic situation that has prevailed in Zimbabwe as this cannot have failed to impact on higher education. In recent years, Zimbabwe has experienced economic stagnation and negative growth. Zimbabwe started experiencing economic crisis in the late 1990s (Coltart, 2009). The Zimbabwean economy entered a hyperinflation zone to such an extent that, by 2008, Zimbabwe had the highest monthly inflation rate of 79,600,000,000%. In January 2009, the Zimbabwean dollar had become valueless so that Z$100,000,000,000 was equivalent to just US$2.5 (Hanke, 2008). During the same period in January 2009, the Zimbabwean dollar had lost more of its value with economists reporting that Z$100,000,000,000 was equivalent to US$2.5 (Shizha & Kariwo, 2011). The clear implication was that the Zimbabwe dollar had lost its real value and purchasing power. Such a context would not have spared the higher education sector, which also included any meaningful quality assurance. Thus the high inflation had a negative impact in the higher education sector. Munyukwe (2008) observed that the economic crisis devastated universities resulting in

plummeting standards. For instance, some HEIs and students had difficulty in budgeting and making long-term plans due to the prevailing high inflation environment.

It was not until 2008 that Zimbabwe abandoned use of the dollar and adopted a multi-currency regime[7] but that had its own impact too. The adoption of the multicurrency system has made HE even more expensive and out of reach for many (Buigut, 2015). For instance, when the academic year started in 2009, only 68 out of 12,000 students returned for the semester. The cause was the unaffordable tuition fees ranging from US$403 to US$600 when the average salary in the country was just US$100 (Chidindi, 2012). To most people, the tuition fees in the universities are astronomical. Until now the issue of unaffordable fees remains a conscientious issue. In a petition to the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Science and Technology Development, the University of Zimbabwe's Students' Representative Union (SRU) secretary general, Makomborero Haruzivishe, remarked:

> Every semester fees are raised unjustifiably and education is now wildly expensive for the average student hence making it difficult to acquire quality education in an economy which is no longer employment-based. Accommodation fees for students resident at the university were hiked from $800 to $950 per semester (*NewsDay*, 2014).

Notwithstanding the economic crises that Zimbabwe has endured over the years as discussed above, Coltart (2009) notes that Zimbabwe education has not been all doom and gloom as the country remains the African country with the highest literacy rate for three consecutive years with 90.7% literacy rate in 2013 (*Index Mundi*, 2013). Shizha and Kariwo (2011) also believe that the economy has been on the brink of collapse and that statistical estimations show that only between 5% and 10% of the employable population is in formal employment. This implies that many parents and guardians could find challenges in sending their children to university due to loss of income. The economic challenges can send messages on potential challenges that can be expected in quality assurance in the universities.

2.3.3 Funding of HE

I now turn to a brief discussion of funding mechanisms of HE in Zimbabwe. This is necessary to highlight policy issues relative to quality of university education. HE is an important priority

[7] The US dollar and the South African rand are currently the main legal tender in Zimbabwe after the country discarded its dollar. Other legal tender is the British pound, the Australian dollar, Botswana pula, Indian rupee, Chinese yuan, and Japanese yen.

in the public agenda (Johnstone, Arora & Experton, 1998)[8]. For universities to successfully carry out their mandate of providing HE, it requires optimum financial support to achieve their goals. Traditionally, universities in Zimbabwe relied on the taxpayer (through grants allocations) with HE allocations extracted from the national fiscus and other support coming from donors and philanthropists. Shizha and Kariwo (2011) observe that some buildings at the UZ were built with funds from the Beit Trust while the School of Veterinary Science at UZ was built from European Economic Community (EEC) funds. The Rockfeller Foundation, the Kellogg Foundation, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the European Union, the British Council and Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) and the British Overseas Development Agency are also critical partners in HE in Zimbabwe, and some of the mentioned international organisations have also donated towards staff development at the UZ (Samoff & Carrol, 2004). There are debates that surround the role of donors in foreign countries. Tar (2008) notes that donors tend to foist their 'neoliberal' interpretations of the state and democracy while they also impose 'political conditionality' for democracy. However, the dominant narrative around aid is that, due to the current political climate in Zimbabwe, donors have been less willing to make contributions (Kanyongo, 2005). What this means is that, at present, it is largely the financial support from the national fiscus that must sustain universities in Zimbabwe. For a country that has faced economic challenges for a long time this can only imply a huge impact on HE and the quality of teaching and learning in the HE sectors, which cannot be independent of these realities.

Racial discrimination in colonial Zimbabwe was so ubiquitous that few blacks had access to education (Zindi, 1996) with the African schools serving the colonial system by providing a pool of cheap labour (Shizha & Kariwo, 2011). That was the colonial legacy of the pro-independence era. After independence in Zimbabwe, Kanyongo (2005) observes that the government followed a socialist path to redress the inherited inequities and imbalances in HE by the introduction of the grants and loan policy (Kariwo, 2007). Although the policy increased access to higher education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, the policy was abandoned due to unsustainable socio-economic conditions in the country (Munangagwa, 2009). By 1992, a new student financing system based on 100% loan to lessen the burden on the state was introduced (UNESCO, 2004). The new loan system also gave every student including those in private HEIs the ability to obtain loans (UNESCO, 2004). The student's

[8] HE 'is a repository and defender of culture, an agent of change in this culture, an engine for national economic growth, and an instrument for the realization of collective aspirations' (Johnstone, Arora & Experton, 1998).

choice of a university ceased to determine the capacity to receive financial support from the state. Unfortunately, due to the economic challenges that have bedevilled the country for some years now, loans and grants that sustained most university students in Zimbabwe to enable them access HE in the past are now a piece of history (*Newsday*, 2014). Shisha and Kariwo (2011) note huge numbers of students who fail to register for new semesters due to failure to raise university fees. This implies that some students fail to complete their studies on time while even attending lectures may be affected.

Despite the lack of public funding for student loans, there have been many more universities established in Zimbabwe, significantly increasing from just one in 1980 to 17 in 2011 (see Table 2.1). This has been due to government policy on increasing access to higher education. This was during the period when Zimbabwe experienced negative growths of -12.1%, -13.6%, -7.7% and -14.1% in 2003, 2004, 2006 and 2009 respectively (*Index Mundi*, 2010). However, the impact is that there has been a decline in available public (taxpayer-based) revenue due to a shrinking economy (Johnston, 2003). One of the major challenges has been revolving around the means to provide quality HE in a context of increased numbers against a background of limited and dwindling funding. A dominant theme of HE has been financial distress, the principal (although not the sole) condition underlying the World Bank's declaration in 1994 that higher education was in crisis throughout the world (Johnstone, Arora & Experton, 1998). Amonoo-Neizer (1989) notes that African governments spend a very insignificant portion of their GNP on HE. There was a sign of overstretched resources in Zimbabwe where HE received only 0.52%, 0.62%, 1.55% and 1.2% of the GDP in 1996, 1997, 1998 and 1999 respectively (ZIMSTAT, 2012). This could clearly reflect ever-growing financial deficiencies in the face of growing student numbers in universities as shown in Table 2.1. Arguably, Zimbabwe was 'experiencing rising higher education participation rates and lower per student funding, and the correlation between these two factors is becoming increasingly evident' (Wellen, 2005:1). This development confirms that the dominant theme for HE revolved around financial distress (Johnston, Arora & Experton, 1998). No wonder, in a way, that there is a concern for a QA body that focuses on universities' ability to meet customer requirements in terms of cost of higher education and its quality.

2.3.4 Human and infrastructural resources in universities

There is a need to reflect on the extent to which HE in Zimbabwe was in quagmire. Kotecha and Perold (2013) conducted a needs analysis on human resources that impacted on quality of higher education in Zimbabwe. They indicated that the staff complement of senior academics has been severely depleted at Midlands State University (MSU), Great Zimbabwe University (GZU), the National University of Science and Technology (NUST), and Chinhoyi University of Technology (CUT) while between 42% and 65% of teaching posts are currently occupied by teaching assistants (junior lecturers) at MSU and CUT respectively.

Over the years, there has been a serious brain drain in universities in Zimbabwe to countries such as South Africa, Botswana and far afield to countries such as Australia, UK and US, leaving behind those that were mostly under-qualified (Chidindi, 2012; Kariwo, 2007). Some newly established universities do not have any academics at the grade of professorship except the vice and pro-vice-chancellors (Hwami, 2011). Regarding the academic staff complement at the University of Zimbabwe, the institution once employed well over 1,000 professors, but by 2007 the number had dwindled to only 627 faculty staff which led to the closure of some departments (Kotecha & Perold, 2013). One department had a staff complement of just nine lecturers instead of the required twenty while the institution made use of teaching assistants with just first-degree qualifications to teach most courses in some faculties although they are supposed to work under experienced academics (Chidindi, 2012; Makumbe, 2009). In 2009 Harare Institute of Technology had a 70% vacancy level with only 37 academics out of a required 123 (Hwami, 2011). The common impact of the reduced academic staff complement was excessive student–lecturer ratios with one lecturer teaching up to two hundred medical students at one university, with many of them having to teach all year round without a break (Chidindi, 2012). In a letter to the Southern African Regional Universities Association (SARUA) in December 2009, Prof. Lindela Ndlovu expressed the degree of challenges HE in Zimbabwe faced, alleging that:

> … many of our universities were started either at the beginning or in the middle of our economic meltdown so that they never acquired the requisite resources for teaching and learning, including well stocked libraries, or well developed Information Communication Technologies (ICTs), proper teaching equipment and suitably resourced and furnished laboratories (Kotecha & Perold, 2013:38).

The UZ remained almost completely closed in 2008 because of a total breakdown of infrastructure with the toilets at the institution having not been functioning, while the 2008 first semester was postponed due to the lack of clean water that posed a serious health risk in the

midst of the cholera outbreak (Chidindi, 2012). The academic year finally got underway in November, only to end in the middle of first semester exams because the water situation had not been rectified (Coltart, 2009). In one university in Zimbabwe, libraries were stocked with old books, with insufficient books and journals for research; not enough computers; and very limited access to the internet among other challenges (Chidindi, 2012). This was clear evidence of declining condition and maintenance of the physical plant. Addressing quality assurance issues under such circumstances can present a lot of problems; availability of basic infrastructure can be regarded as basic condition.

2.3.5 Economic policy and HE

The policy of 'free'[9] education, which the Zimbabwe government adopted at independence, proved unsustainable because of universities' capital and recurrent expenditures. By the end of the 1980s, 'it became evident that the government's socialist ideology adopted in 1980 was no longer suitable to the changing world and was placing a heavy financial burden on the government' (Kanyongo, 2005:71). Clearly, the resources from the taxpayer and other national resources became insufficient to sustain the country and consequently the Zimbabwe government had to abandon its principles of socialism by the turn of the first decade after independence. There was the need for new strategies to address the problems the country faced.

Kanyongo (2005) observes that one of the strategies Zimbabwe adopted in 1990 was the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) prescribed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The IMF encouraged Zimbabwe 'to reduce spending, to privatise industry and services, to cheapen labour, to open up markets to multinational companies, to relax controls on capital movements, to devalue their currencies, etc' (Levidow, 2002:8). One of ESAP's requirements was that governments cut expenditure in social services sectors and introduce cost recovery actions including in the HE sector (Kanyongo 2005). With specific reference to HE, IMF called upon the Zimbabwe government to 'relieve the burden on public sources of financing higher education by increasing the participation of beneficiaries and their families' (World Bank, 1988:77). This was due to the belief of the IMF that higher education has little role in promoting poverty alleviation (Bloom, Canning & Chan, 2006) and that 'primary and secondary education were more important for development' (Shizha & Kariwo, 2011:8). Most

[9] The quotation marks for 'free' denote that education was not free in the true sense as students or parents were often asked to contribute towards the running of educational institutions through some financial charges or manual labour.

African governments have opposed the IMF's policies on higher education, as it held policies that have perpetuated neglect of the higher education sector (Banya & Elu, 2001). Such advice can impact higher education in that it only promotes access to higher education for the 'elite' group of society. In a country where families struggle to provide even the basic necessities, higher education can be regarded as one of the luxuries. It was a free market model which was at complete odds with the socialist underpinnings of Zimbabwe when it first gained independence.

2.3.6 Tuition fees in HE

Universities in Zimbabwe were called upon to generate revenue for their operations (Hwami, 2011). They had to be innovative and devise ways of raising funds to sustain themselves. As a means to augment university finances from the dwindling national fiscus and the fading donors, tuition fees became an option (Kotech & Perold, 2010). The charging of fees at universities was adopted as policy in 2001 (Shizha & Kariwo, 2010). Those who desired HE were therefore required to make contributions towards its costs. To buttress such decisions, most governments argued that those who enrol for HE got private benefits in terms of better employment opportunities and better salaries in return (Shizha & Kariwo, 2011). In the same way as the trend worldwide, the inadequacy of financial resources for HE in Zimbabwe forced many universities to introduce tuition fees where these were non-existent or increased fees where they already existed (Eicher & Chevaillier, 2002). There was a need for the universities to strengthen their financial circumstances through tuition fees, especially in a Zimbabwean context where the macroeconomic environment had taken a nosedive.

Financing higher education has been marked by challenges. The World Bank (2003) in Kariwo (2007) notes that the expenditure per student in higher education is over 300% of GNP per capita, yet for primary education it is only 19% of GNP per capita. This only reflects the challenges that the government faced in a non-performing economy. Hence, Shizha and Kariwo (2011:127) notes that in the 2009 Budget Statement the Minister of Finance, Tendai Biti, highlighted the need to spread the burden of financing HE by increasing cost sharing remarking:

> Mr Speaker Sir, the expenditure requirements to restore quality education in our higher institutions make it unavoidable that Government shares some of the costs of higher education with the parents. This also improves accountability among students in universities ... as well as ownership of the institutions' facilities. Honourable Members will have noted the many instances where,

> surprisingly, even well-endowed parents display inability to pay higher education fees when they were able to get their children through ordinary and advanced level education without State assistance.

Shizha & Kariwo (2011:128) adds that Minister Biti went on to talk about the then new fee structure in universities remarking:

> Government has, therefore, approved the tuition fees and levies for State Universities, Polytechnics and Teachers' Colleges payable in both local and foreign currency. The fees schedules were determined on the principles of cost sharing, the need to ensure access and equity, the need to retain critical staff in institutions of higher learning, the need to promote quality education and finally the need to restore Zimbabwe's leading position in the area of education and training.

With a shift towards cost sharing, student fees still only contributed 12.4% of universities' financial needs, and other donations contributed 5.7%, with the government contributing the remainder (Kotecha, 2010). This shows the government still largely carries the burden of funding HE. Despite the burdens of student fees, they can be justifiable to augment available financial resources. One would inevitably believe that the Zimbabwe government realised that 'those who benefit should at least share in the costs' by introducing tuition fees (Johnstone, 2003:4).

While the idea of tuition fee payment was an option in the face of dwindling financial support from traditional sources, it would have worked well for the students to pay for HE where the GNI was reasonable; although, with Zimbabwe facing economic challenges, the use of fees to augment university income becomes less desirable because of the social impact it would have on families. Research has shown that there is correlation between low HE participation and family income and status (McMahon, 2009). Some negative effects have been felt in Zimbabwe through the tuition fees in universities. With Zimbabwe characterised by low GNI as outlined above, many HE students could be facing bottlenecks through cost sharing thereby depriving them of their right to HE. In addition to that, a shift towards a tuition fee policy in universities means that it can promote elitism, which is a shift away from 'mass' HE (Shizha & Karuwo, 2011).

The tuition fee policy sparked off a series of student demonstrations due to its unpopularity with students, with the result that one public university at one time closed for several months following clashes between the riot police and students (Shizha & Kariwo, 2010). With so many students struggling to pay their fees, arrears are a chronic problem at most universities. In some universities, well over one half of all fee income was still outstanding at the end of the 2009

academic year (Chidindi, 2012). This high level of defaults on fees has forced some universities to resort to other fee enforcement payment methods such as withholding exam results or certificates until fees have been paid in full (Shizha & Kariwo, 2010).

Tuition fees in the universities brought with them some challenges. Beside students' inability to pay university fees, Samoff and Carrol (2004) note that the fee issue caused problems in several universities in Africa, including in Zimbabwe where student protests, riots and strikes were commonplace (Chidindi, 2012). Student arrests were made at several campuses while closures of some HEIs were frequent. This implies that academic freedom was severely curtailed in such circumstances and the quality of teaching and learning would be compromised as well. The major challenge regards how to address issues of quality assurance in a context of political volatility characterised by limited and dwindling funding. Quality assurance can be a challenge when in a context in which students' most basic needs are not being met.

2.3.7 Support for students in difficult circumstances

In an effort to address equity issues in HE, Kotecha and Perold (2013) observe that the Zimbabwean government has taken steps to cap tuition limits as well as increases. Although the government's intention may be good, there has been negative impact. Interference in tuition that universities can charge students may also mean limiting universities' revenue-generating strategy. For instance, Lupane State University reported that undergraduate fees that the Zimbabwe government gazetted are and remain far below the cost required to run the universities efficiently.

After the collapse of the loans-and-grants scheme in 2005, the government initiated an alternative student financing system arrangement. The Cadetship Programme was put in place to cushion the underprivileged, whereby government undertook to pay tuition fees for students who are unable to pay fees from their own means. In terms of this programme the Government makes special arrangements with universities whereby the Treasury releases money directly to the institutions while the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education acts as the facilitator. Students from the public and private universities can apply for the cadetship programme (Shizha & Kariwo, 2010). This means the Zimbabwe government makes some contribution in enabling private universities to provide their intended services while they assist institutions to fill up the gap where state universities cannot satisfy demand for HE. In return, the beneficiaries

of the scheme are 'bonded' by making it mandatory for them to work in Zimbabwe after studies for the same number of years they received funding.

Although the Cadetship Programme can be regarded as a noble option to assist students in difficult circumstances to access HE, it is observed that of the US$69 million the Ministry of Higher Education requested from Treasury to finance the programme in 2012, only US$25 million was allocated in the national budget. Treasury therefore allocated inadequate funding for the programme with several universities failing to access Cadetship Programme funds in the 2012 to 2013 academic year, negatively impacting on the universities' operations as they increased (Kotecha, 2013). It means since universities were not receiving the money that was due to them, they were unable to make purchasing plans. Some universities refused to register students who were under the Cadetship Programme while others withheld students' study results. At MSU students on cadetship with fees arrears could not graduate, or have their results released, until the money the government promised to pay, had been paid. Instead, they were only given letters stating that they had completed degree studies and were waiting for the HE ministry to clear their arrears before release of results (*Daily News*, 2013). Peter Mataruse, the chairman for the Parliamentary portfolio committee on Higher and Tertiary Education, Science and Technology Development, enquired how the more than $63 million on the Cadetship Programme would be settled in 2014, let alone how to cater for any new applicants (*Newsday*, 2014). He went on to encourage the government to increase allocations for the Cadetship Programme and scholarships so as to make HE accessible to vulnerable students in society (*Newsday*, 2014).

The fact that President Robert Mugabe capped only 612 out of the 4000 UZ students who were scheduled to graduate in the 2009 graduation ceremony illuminates the extent of the crisis in the HE sector in Zimbabwe (Gumbo, 2009). Prostitution among university students to raise tuition fees and other educational costs also paints a grim picture of the situation propelled by hardship in universities in Zimbabwe (Chidindi, 2012; Makoni, 2007). The University of Zimbabwe's Students' Representative Union (SRU) secretary general, Makomborero Haruzivishe, recently remarked that the financial woes of some students have resulted in many of them failing to attend lessons as they are forced into vices, such as drug abuse and prostitution (*Newsday*, 2014). Any well-functioning QA body would draw attention to these kinds of social ills and ensure that they are rectified.

2.3.8 Alternative institutional resourcefulness

When government support is at its lowest ebb universities have to look elsewhere rather than just at their traditional source of support. They can seek alternative and viable sources of funding such as from either domestic or foreign donors. For instance, Bindura University of Science Education established a printing press and expanded its farm projects. Zimbabwe Open University opened an internet café. Chinhoyi University of Technology recently started operating its Chinhoyi University Hotel. In fact, the remarks of the Minister of Finance in 2009 summarised well the options that universities may have as government support dwindles. He remarked that 'to this end, institutions are required to embark on revenue generating projects and activities such as applied research and full utilisation of land as well as other resources allocated to them' (Shizha & Kariwo, 2012:122).

Peter Mataruse, the chairman of the Parliamentary portfolio committee on Higher and Tertiary Education, Science and Technology Development, advised the HE Ministry to identify potential projects and activities that can be commercialised and ensure self-sustenance of the Ministry so as to reduce the burden on the fiscus (*Newsday*, 2014). Hwami (2011) observes that most universities have since embarked on enrolling fee-paying students in what are invariably referred to as parallel programmes[10], in which they pay full fees with no government subsidy, at universities such as UZ, MSU, GZU and NUST. Such programmes have the capacity to enhance opportunities for those who would be unable to enrol in full-time programmes, e.g. employed individuals. However, such parallel programmes can only be enrolled in by individuals with rich socio-economic backgrounds. As a sad consequence, HE becomes a traded commodity that has to be purchased by a consumer and a product to be retailed by universities (Altbach, 2004; Levidow, 2005), particularly in Zimbabwe which has been enmeshed in an economic crisis for more than a decade. Most people would still find it too expensive to pay the prescribed tuition fees in a country where salaries fail to sustain families.

In the light of the uniquely complex and tragic environment described above there has to be some supportive policy framework for the allocation of resources to the HE sector (Ziderman and Albrecht, 1995). Without more and better HE, developing world countries will increasingly find difficulties in benefiting from the global knowledge-based economy (World Bank, 2000). There is a crucial need to identify alternative sources of funding. Any QA body that operates in

[10] These are normal degree courses offered in the evenings, weekends and holidays when formal university business has closed.

such an environment would have to focus on the peculiar conditions in which HE operates in Zimbabwe, a context in which there is a need to focus on fundamental input matters.

2.4 Conclusion

From the outline of HE in Zimbabwe, it is clear that Zimbabwe is in the process of rapidly expanding its HE enrolment and institutional expansion. QA policy is still attempting to navigate the implementation process in the light of the desperate economic constraints that have existed in the country for some years now. This thesis looks at quality assurance in higher education through ZIMCHE. This chapter therefore assists us to appreciate the context in which higher education operates in Zimbabwe. As a result the chapter potentially helps to appreciate the kind of context in which ZIMCHE has to quality assure higher education.

Chapter 3

Theoretical underpinnings of the study

3.1 Introduction

This thesis develops an understanding of the mechanisms from which the QA processes emerge in HE in Zimbabwe. I take a critical realist position in order to seek to move beyond which events and experiences emerge. QA in HE is a many-faceted and complex phenomenon and therefore critical realism is particularly well suited to explore and understand such complexity (Andrews, 2008). This means that perceptions and experiences that can be obtained through HE stakeholders and documents as sources of data on QA practices in Zimbabwe can be insufficient to establish what lies underneath the surface (more discussion on this can be obtained in the Methodology chapter). A critical realist standpoint therefore is crucial.

Before I embark on my whole study on QA, therefore, I wish to point out a few issues about the nature of truth. This chapter therefore discusses the main features of critical realism (thereafter, CR) ontology[11] associated with Bhaskar (1993), the implications of its key elements, and the exploration of its potential and merits as a philosophical framework for research into QA of teaching and learning in HE research, before getting into a discussion on discourses within the critical realist framework.

3.2 The ontological position of the study: critical realism

This study investigates the mechanisms that underlie ZIMCHE as it enacts its role as an external quality assurance body. The research study took the form of a critical discourse analysis, which can be undertaken from various philosophical positions. In this case Roy Bhaskar's critical realism (CR) provided the ontological position with the understanding that discourses function as mechanisms in form of powers, structures or tendencies (Fairclough, 2005). Every thesis needs a philosophical under-labourer which makes the ontological position of the study clear. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* quotes John Locke's (1959) argument on human knowledge: 'It is ambition enough to be employed as the under-labourer in clearing the ground a little, and removing some of the rubbish which lies in the way to knowledge'. Bhaskar's CR

[11] Ontology is the study of being, existence, or the way the world is.

ontology is thus called upon in this study to perform the clearing role as an under-labourer, not only to explain the complexities in QA in quality assurance processes in HE but also as a framework because it allows researchers 'to look at the nature of reality and at mechanisms that produce, or have the tendency to produce, events and experiences of those events' (Oltmann & Boughey, 2012:333). From a critical realist's standpoint, research must go beyond description of experience and so this research study goes further to explore how QA processes emerge through the identification of the underlying mechanisms in Zimbabwean HE. Therefore, as critical realists insist, a reflection on underlying mechanisms enables the exploration of why things in QA have remained as they are or why they have changed, and, critically, what was necessary for this to be possible (Eaton, 2002). CR therefore remains only a framework that provides me with a critical eye to look at the world of HE, more generally, and QA, more specifically. I will now consider some of the central tenets of CR and how they have underpinned this study.

3.3 Stratified ontology

Bhaskar (1993) defends the necessity to understand the deepest layers of reality, including the agents and their causal powers, and thus conceptualises and believes in the existence of stratified ontology that relates to open and closed systems, namely: the empirical, the actual and the real as indicated in Figure 3.1 below.

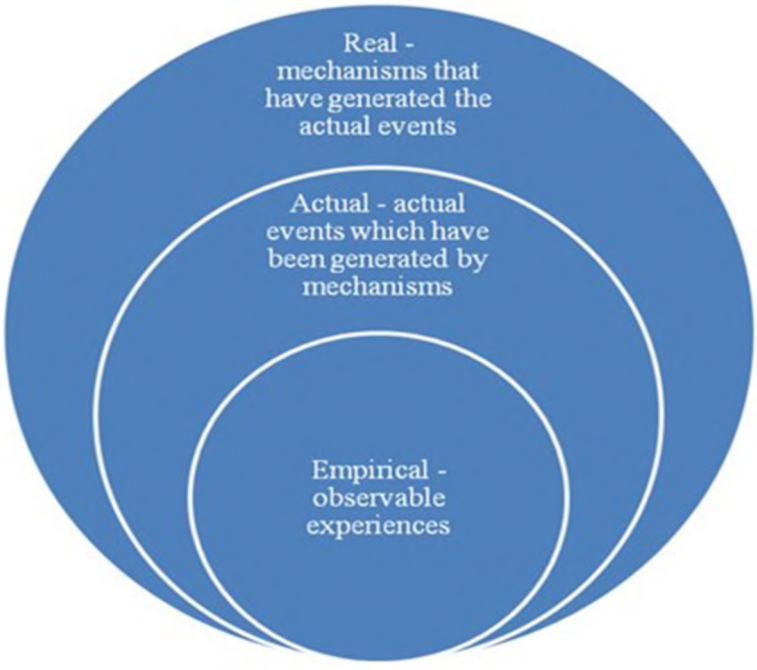

Figure 3.1: Bhaskar's three strata of reality (From Mingers and Willcocks, 2004)

Figure 3.1 above represents Bhaskar's transcendental realism, an in-depth ontology with an acknowledgement that 'things may not be as they seem, so critical realists look beyond the surface of things' (Oltmann & Boughey, 2012). Critical realists therefore encourage the avoidance of judgemental relativism, i.e. 'that all representations of the world are equally good – and search for grounds for determining whether some representations constitute better knowledge of the world than others' (Fairclough, 2005:922). That is partly the reason why Bhaskar points out that what we experience is only a tip of the iceberg of the reality of our world, perceiving only the surface of a reality hiding in deeper strata (Ehret, 2013). Therefore, Bhaskar's idea of reality is that it is stratified with underlying generative mechanisms and events. Bhaskar's CR has a distinctive concept of stratification containing the multi-layered strata of the real (where mechanisms with generative powers exist), actual (where things happen although we may not experience all of them), and the empirical (what we experience and our interpretations of experienced events) (Sayer, 2000), as depicted in Table 3.1 and discussed in turn.

As is shown in Figure 3.1 above, the stratum of the empirical is a subset of the stratum of the actual, which in turn is a subset of the stratum of the real (Elder-Vass, 2010) meaning that they are inextricably interdependent conceptual realities. Elder-Vass (2007) goes on to assert that Bhaskar's three strata, the empirical, the actual and the real, must be considered as a subset of the other. In fact, mechanisms, events and experience overlap the strata (Elder-Vass, 2010). I attempt to exemplify the critical realist strata of QA from the world of HE in Table 3.1 below with brief discussions in turn.

Strata of reality	Examples of reality in HE
The empirical **Human experience**	Multiple experiences of academics: leaving profession due to low pay in academia, lack of academic freedom, increased managerialism in universities, shifts in understanding of the role of the university, academic inflation in required qualifications etc.
The actual **Events happening (observed or unobserved)**	Event of academics leaving the academic profession into private sector, into the diaspora etc.
The real **Causal mechanisms generating events**	Volatile political situation
Strata of reality	Examples of reality in HE

Table 3.1 Bhaskar's critical realist strata with examples from the HE sector

3.3.1 Stratum of the empirical

The stratum of the empirical is concerned with the observable individual experiences, events and behaviours (Scott, 2010; Elder-Vass, 2010). I show this at a later stage through the data analysis as the data will be at the level of experiences and events. Through analysis, I will try to identify (some of) the mechanisms from which these emerge.

As I briefly discussed above, critical realists argue that empiricists' science remain limited only to these observed events (Ehret, 2013). Through the empirical reality, humans express their perspectives on the world, i.e. of the actual and real strata (Clark, 2008). In summary, empirical reality consists of the events and behaviour that we directly or indirectly see, understand and experience. An example of the actual from the HE sector is to take the multiple experiences of academics, e.g. leaving the profession due to low pay in academia, lack of academic freedom, increased managerialism in universities, shifts in understanding of the role of the university, academic inflation in required qualifications, etc. The empirical research relates to the observed departure of the academics and misses the researcher's scope of knowledge as well as the mechanisms and structures that have the causal powers to shape reality in the HE sector, as well as different perceptions of the observed experiences. However, empiricists would not go beyond the experiences. As Clegg (2005) notes, CR therefore allows for epistemological

relativism[12] that enables human beings to have multiple and subjective experiences or perceptions of the same event. Quality of HE may be experienced differently, hence it may also be understood in very different ways by the different players involved in the review even though they may all be party to the same event.

3.3.2 Stratum of the actual

The stratum of the actual refers to the events which emerge from the interplay of mechanisms and structures in the real (Scott, 2010). In both open (as in research in the social sciences) and closed (as in research in the natural sciences) systems, there is an attempt to make a closed system so that there are non-constant and constant structures and mechanisms which generate events respectively to make them true objects and of concern to science. In both systems, it is crucial to distinguish structures and mechanisms that produce events. I address structural issues later in this chapter.

While we cannot observe the real, we can observe the stratum of the actual as there are things that we can observe. Citing an example of the stratum of the actual, I take the example of the stratum of the empirical further. As academics may be leaving the academic profession, the event is the academics' leaving e.g. into private sector, into the diaspora etc. This can be regarded as the observed event that happens on the stratum of the actual, but the stratum of the real cannot be observed and needs to be investigated.

In HE our discussion about quality is to some extent based upon the events which are presupposed by our substantive practices. An important characteristic of CR is that scientists have to imagine the mechanism or structure which if included would explain the events or regularity in question. Bhaskar (1989) notes that it is important to consider possible explanations or structures which have to be eliminated. For instance, the abandoning of the academic profession by academics due to interference in HE may not necessarily be the (only) cause of the fall of quality in HE, for it is clearly not the only mechanism: events and experiences emerge from the complex interplay of multiple mechanisms. Stakeholders' influence may possibly be changing a HEI (Scott, 2010) as stakeholders ratify institutional

[12] The key CR tenets of epistemological relativism and ontological realism, and more specifically the concepts of dialogue and rhetoric, support the goal of developing 'open-minded individuals who can deal with the diversity of opinion and complexity of issues without losing sight of the commitment to arriving at the most accurate understanding of reality' (Shipway, 2010:186). Players have to learn to 'balance the contradictory tasks of attending to the reality of things while being aware of the shortcomings and limitations of the ways they access that reality' (Shipway, 2010:187).

mission and purposes in a fit for/of purpose approach (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2005), thereby impacting on quality of teaching and learning in the process. It therefore implies that there are always some causal accounts that result in the observable and unobservable entities. In search of a causal factor, one is most likely to ask 'what makes it happen', what 'produces', 'generates', 'creates' or 'determines' it, or, more weakly, what 'enables' or 'leads to' it" (Sayer, 1992:102). Mechanisms interplay and the events that occur can be a result of the specific interplay of active mechanisms in that context.

3.3.3 Stratum of the real

Critical realists view experiences as only a small proportion of what could potentially happen in the world (Littlejohn, 2003). Discussions above about the strata of the empirical and the actual show that critical realists attempt to investigate these empirical and actual events in order to identify other causal mechanisms. Such causal mechanisms reside in what Bhaskar calls the stratum of the real. Critical realists therefore hold that there are causal mechanisms that have not necessarily been exercised in the actual or perceived events (Ehret, 2013). Thus in the stratum of the real we locate the potential powers in deeper stratum called the real (Bhaskar, 1998; Sayer, 2000).

In the stratum of the real are the underlying generative mechanisms and structures that are responsible for what we can see or observe and how we experience this (Scott, 2010). Although generative mechanisms cannot be directly observed, they can be identified through their effects (McEnvoy & Richards, 2003). The purpose of CR philosophy in a social science research study is therefore to obtain knowledge about the underlying causal mechanisms (McEvoy & Richards, 2003), i.e. those causal mechanisms that we are unable to see. These are things that we look at for explanatory purposes, thereby fulfilling the CR ontological depth objective. For instance, teaching and learning emerge from the interplay of mechanisms (real) as events (actual) that are experienced (empirical). While we may not see what is in the stratum of the real, Bhaskar encourages an understanding of our experiences or the causes of the events that we perceive. Therefore, we must attempt not only to obtain a confirmation of our experiences, but also to understand the causality of our experiences or the causes of the events that we perceive in the world. Thus Bhaskar encourages the search for understanding what lies behind what we recognise. Although it is the objective in this study to understand the generative mechanisms or structures from which QA in HE in Zimbabwe is emerging, it is not the end as further

questions have to asked about the reasons why it is that way; the step therefore is repeatedly taken. However, Scott (2005) argues that the threat to getting deeper into the mechanisms can be lack of resources at the disposal of the researchers, which may not allow them to explore the subject matter further.

Citing an example from the HE sector in Table 3.1 of academics leaving the profession, political interference or insecurity may be observed but there can be multiple other unobserved or hidden mechanisms that trigger the flight of the academics. To unearth that, researchers need to dig deeper as such causal mechanisms reside in the yet deeper stratum of the real. CR therefore attempts to disentangle the causal mechanisms to identify the system's characteristics and potential paths in search of generative mechanisms.

As mentioned above, I take CR as the ontological position for this study and, by focusing on different realities in the empirical, the actual and the real domains as Bhaskar advocates, we will see that there is a need to obtain a reality that is independent of the researcher; an independence that requires exposing that reality to many interpretations (Pring, 2000). I want to move beyond a record of narratives regarding mechanisms that underlie ZIMCHE's QA. To interrogate QA mechanisms from which events and experiences emerge, the reality may not be true of human understanding as that may be fluid and perspectival (Neave, 2006). Since I have indicated in the CR discussion that there are multiple types of mechanisms in an open system, and in HE for that matter, it can be seen that it is impossible to select an analytical lens that will identify them all (Bhaskar, 1993). Each analytical approach would enable certain insights but entail other blind spots. In the case of this research study, I thus accept that the choice of critical discourse analysis permits an in-depth focus on the ways in which discourses enable and constrain the emergence of understandings and processes of QA, while neglecting to focus in as much depth on non-discursive mechanisms. I therefore opt for a version of critical discourse analysis that is based upon a critical realist ontology which potentially has great value to contribute to the research of the discursive constructions of QA of the ZIMCHE: Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (CDA), which I discuss in the Theoretical chapter.

Taking a brief look at the social construction of 'quality', I to some extent discuss that quality is a stakeholder conception of the world of HE, and hence a phenomenon that is socially constructed. Although I address 'discourse' next, it is crucial to note that it is regarded as social order 'historically situated and therefore relative, socially constructed and changeable' (Locke,

2004:1). This means such a position requires interrogating discourse itself as an essential and crucial activity.

3.4 Discourses

Although CDA provides a methodology in this study, as a way of collecting and analysing my data, it is also a substantive theory which provides a particular way of understanding the world of HE through discourse. More on CDA as an actual method is found in the Methodology chapter. I discuss the conception of 'discourse', and then focus on Fairclough's thoughts about discourse and its contribution to research on QA in HE consistent with a CR position.

Discourses are used as a theoretical concept from within multiple ontological positions and this leads to a variety of understandings of the term. This section discusses some of these understandings and shows how in this study the notion of discourses pertains to mechanisms in the CR sense.

I start this section with exploring the various understandings of discourses, which can be used differently by different researchers in different research paradigms/ontological positions. 'Discourse' can be defined as a 'cohesive ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations' (Epstein, 2008:2) that affords 'a way of speaking which gives meaning to experiences from a particular perspective' (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002:66–67). Discourses are therefore understood to have power. Fairclough, Mulderrig and Wodak (2012) add that discourse as a representation of social life, language or communication is used in relation to social practices. This makes CDA the study of 'language as a form of social practice' (Fairclough, 2001: 18).

Drawing on Foucault's perception, Fairclough (1992:64) defines discourse as 'a practice not just of representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning'. With a similar conception, Locke (2004:4) defines discourse as 'a way of making sense of the world (or some aspect of it) as reflected in human sign systems (including verbal language)'. Discourse encompasses not only written and spoken language but also visual images (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). 'Discourse' therefore may imply 'ways of being and doing as well as ways of signifying' (Locke, 2004:7).

'Discourse' is therefore a communicative event made up of language. Thus discourses are:

> … systematically organised sets of statements which give expression to the meanings and values of an institution. Beyond that, they define, describe and

> delimit what it is possible to say and not possible to say (and by extension – what it is possible to do or not to do) with respect to the area of concern of that institution, whether marginally or centrally (Kress, 1989:7).

Discourse becomes more than a 'domain of statements', as it goes further to provide a particular way of representing the social world (Fairclough, 2003:124). It is crucial to note that, while there is general consensus amongst these researchers that discourses are clumps of ideas that have power over what it is possible to say and do (along the lines of the Kress quote above), there is not general agreement between them as to the ontological status of discourses themselves. In the case of this CR study, discourses are understood to be mechanisms at the level of the real, in that they are intransitive (they exist whether or not the people who draw on them are aware of them) and they have causal powers, in that they can affect what events and experiences emerge at the levels of the actual and empirical. It is imperative to note that discourses alone do not constitute all the possible mechanisms.

However, for some researchers discourse goes beyond meaning captured in language to include meaning captured in a full range of representations such as pictures, sounds etc. Thus a related term which some researchers draw on, such as Fairclough (2005:928), is 'semiosis', which encompasses 'visual images and body language'. In concurrence, Gee (1996:viii) adds that 'discourse' is much more than language and includes 'ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing … by specific groups of people ... always a social order and product of social histories'. Discourse from this perspective therefore represents an aspect of social life or practice (Fairclough, 2005).

Karlberg (2005:1) argues that 'the way we think and talk about a subject influences and reflects the ways we act in relation to that subject'. It follows that through discourse we can question our use of our rational thinking and our arguments or prevailing ideas. If 'discourse' is regarded as social order as depicted by Fairclough, it is 'historically situated and therefore relative, socially constructed and changeable' (Locke, 2004:1). This allows 'discourses' to 'include representations of how things are and have been, as well as imaginaries – representations of how things might or could or should be' (Fairclough, 2003:207). This also gives discourse the 'principal means by which organization members create a coherent social reality that frames their sense of who they are' (Fairclough, 2005:918–919). Therefore discourse is a form of social practice in the sense that it helps to sustain and reproduce the social status quo while it contributes to social transformation.

3.4.1 The implications of discourses

The understanding of the term 'discourses' such as sociocultural practices implies that discourses have causal power in the social world and function as mechanisms (Kress, 1990). According to Hansen (2006), social practice is the enactment of discourses. For instance, 'every social event or act involves some level of communication which can be analysed for the discourses that surround and give meaning to it' hence discourses can be one causal mechanism among a myriad possible others (Banta, 2012). I therefore argue that indeed such causal powers may have some effects when activated in some contexts and cause change. Hence, communication can have causal effects to transform organisations (Fairclough, 2005). Discourses are therefore mechanisms and CR understands events and experiences as emerging from the interplay of active mechanisms. Thus, while the identification of discourses through research does not constitute a full understanding of all mechanisms at play in the emergence of a particular phenomenon (e.g. QA in HE in Zimbabwe), it does have the potential to provide important insights.

Because 'a discourse can have a directional effect of constraint or enablement on certain actions within a phenomenon' (Banta, 2012:8), it can be a determinant factor of an event and experiences of that event. In view of this discussion, CDA tools are therefore grounded in a CR view of the social world and can enable generalisations about the effect discourse is having on a phenomenon of interest (Banta, 2012). In my study I attempt to understand the discourses as constructing the roles and processes of ZIMCHE in QA in HE in Zimbabwe. This means discourse of quality can have an impact on QA in HE in Zimbabwe with regards to practices and processes. Thus the implication is that all discourses are mechanisms with potential causal power to enable or constrain the phenomenon. Clearly I therefore obtain multiple discourses in my data.

Discourses can serve well as explanatory critique of social practices and are crucial in searching out methods for solutions (Bhaskar 1986, in Fairclough, 2001). However, the explanatory aspect is a CR concept, as once people are aware of the challenges they face, they initiate action to address those challenges. This can be regarded as a critique of aspects of existing reality on the grounds of an existing reality which should be changed (Bhaskar, 1989). One of the reasons for this study becomes the identification of discourses, and reflection on their effects can therefore enable organisations to examine themselves and obtain cues to possible solutions to prevailing challenges. Because discourses are intransitive, we are often unaware of them. Thus,

through concern, an analysis of discourse helps to scrutinise 'the conditions of the situational context and the more remote conditions of institutions and social structures' (Fairclough, 1989:26).

We are often oblivious to discourses as we use them and so we are unaware of how they enable and constrain our conceptualisations and practices. Through research this may become a 'new way of thinking, a new philosophy', to 'carry out checks and make judgements' and 'correct distortions in common sense ways of thinking' (Gramsci, 1995:297–303). Thus 'new' experiences can bring change in beliefs, and even change in habits of action regarding QA in HE.

Considering QA which is the concern of this study, as alluded to by Fairclough (2005), changes in quality and QA discourses can contribute to change in beliefs, processes and habits of action. Change can take place although it is acknowledged that people can be 'resistant to internal criticism and self-scrutiny because uttering viewpoints that undermine them defines one as being outside of them' (Rogers, 2004). This speaks to the inherently ideological nature of discourses. Ideology is made up of a set of beliefs, attitudes and behaviours that constitute perspectives on the world (Johnstone, 2008). Discourse is understood in this thesis (and therefore a discussion that belongs in this chapter) as it concerns itself 'with certain objects and puts forward concepts, viewpoints, and values at the expense of others' (Rogers, 2004:6). This is because discourses have power, i.e. they function at the level of the real as mechanisms constraining and enabling what events transpire and how the events are experienced (Fairclough, 1989). Thus discourse has the capacity to sustain and reproduce the social status quo while it contributes to transforming society. In the case of this study, discourses have the potential to help ZIMCHE and HEIs make sense of quality of HE, and QA processes and practices. Such constructions can be revealed through pertinent documents, speeches and interactions among stakeholders (which I discuss further in the Methodology chapter). Analysis of these intricacies can be achieved through CDA as it offers descriptions, interpretations and explanations which I address in the next section.

3.5 Open and closed systems

Bhaskar discusses the existence of closed and open systems. I discuss the two systems in turn.

In closed systems (as is possible in research in the natural sciences[13]) there are non-constant mechanisms that generate events. Natural scientists are able to isolate causal mechanisms under certain experimental conditions (Bhaskar, 1989), which is not possible in social sciences. To critical realists, in closed systems there are causes and effects that are observed in carefully controlled experiments and an empiricist vision of science. Open systems are applicable to social sciences with differentiated causes and effects and this is why researchers cannot use experiments or predictive statements (Shipway, 2010).

Perspectives on closed and open systems discussed above have their own critiques. Empiricists limit reality to only what we experience yet that is just a small proportion of what could potentially happen in the world (Littlejohn, 2003). Thus the empiricists' position is underpinned by a central fallacy, which Littlejohn calls an epistemic fallacy, i.e. confusing the nature of reality with our knowledge of reality (Fairclough, 2005). This means that through epistemic fallacy empiricists have the incorrect notion that what we know is what is really there and all that is really there.

Bhaskar argues that life is not a closed social system but an open system which emerges from the interplay of myriad independent mechanisms that operate simultaneously (Bhaskar, 1989). The crucial point of Bhaskar's argument is that it is impossible for the social scientist (as in the case of this research study) to create enclosures and control the mechanisms in their research of open systems. No discursive account can evade the issues of truth, truthfulness, and appropriateness (Fairclough, Jessop & Sayer, 2002).

With respect to open systems (as in this research study), HE operates in an open system where no constant influential elements exist, while there is a 'complex interaction with other mechanisms, which either cooperate with or work against the mechanism in question' (Danermark, Ekström, Jakobsen & Karlsson, 2002:199). Citing an example in QA in HE, quality can be impacted by the availability of qualified academics, the availability of suitable resources, the preparedness of students, or the emergence from the interplay of multiple such mechanisms. Implementation of QA practices and processes may similarly be influenced by resource availability, be it human or financial resources. However, several other mechanisms may have contributed significantly to QA and quality of HE other than material issues.

[13] Although sciences are not themselves closed systems – occurring as their research interests do in the flux and flow of the real world. It's just that natural scientists are able to produce closed systems in laboratory settings etc. where variables are closed off and the effects of some mechanisms are controlled.

Therefore, any study that takes a CR orientation endeavours to not only identify the mechanisms from what the phenomenon emerges but also identify how the interplay of such mechanisms has specific contextual effects. Furthermore, this notion of an open system with potentially infinite mechanisms at play means that any study will always be partial in its success at identifying such mechanisms. That is the reason why critical realists need to dig deeper and 'look beyond the appearance of things' (Oltmann & Boughey, 2012:335), hence I look at generative mechanisms next.

3.6 Generative mechanisms

In social sciences and from a CR standpoint, scientists have to proceed in a pragmatic manner to attempt to identify potential causal mechanisms 'where they occur in their most significant form and are least affected by disturbing influence' (Collier, 1994). Thus critical realists are concerned with underlying causal mechanisms, not the experiences or the events (McEvoy & Richards, 2003). Generative mechanisms are the structures, powers and relations that explain how things work below a surface (Fleetwood, 2001). Generative mechanisms are found in the stratum of the real which is the deepest of the strata (Bhaskar, 1978), and being 'generative' means the ability of the mechanisms to produce an event. 'Generative mechanisms are either generative or dormant, that is, they may generate an event or not meaning that the stratum of the real which has the causal powers may not be exercised' (Oltmann & Boughey, 2012:336). This means generative mechanisms may remain latent in some instances until they are activated in specific circumstances.

Generative mechanisms neither necessarily result in any events that are located in the stratum of the actual nor in any experiences that are located in the stratum of the empirical (Bhaskar, 1978). This therefore means generative mechanisms may or may not generate new structures, forces, powers and other mechanisms, and this is known as emergence (Danermark, Ekström , Jakobsen & Karlsson, 2002). This refers to whether an event is produced or if it is determined by mechanisms at other levels (Danermark, 2001). However, critical realists believe that observable or unobservable generative mechanisms can be felt through their effects (McEvoy & Richards, 2003). Critical realists believe that the need to carry out research in both social and natural sciences is the concern with mechanisms that cause events, answering 'why' and 'how' questions (Wynn & Williams, 2012). In the social sciences from a CR standpoint, scientists have to proceed in a pragmatic manner to attempt to identify potential causal mechanisms

'where they occur in their most significant form and are least affected by disturbing influence' (Collier, 1994). Social scientists look at phenomena that are produced in an open system where they have to refer to one or more of the multiple generative mechanisms. As this research looks at QA in HE, I am dealing with complexity where I deal with mechanisms which operate at different ontological levels of reality. In relation to this study, the way we think about QA in HE reflects the way we can act upon it.

3.7 Immanent critique

In CR, mediating entities include social elements, which include discourses 'which constitute social selections and orderings of the allowances of social structures as actualisable allowances in particular areas of social life in a certain time and place' (Fairclough, 2005:922). I discuss discourse in detail in the research methods chapter. However, it is imperative at this juncture to understand that discourse reflects the world's conceptual reality (Bhaskar 1978). 'Discourse is the principal means by which organization members create a coherent social reality that frames their sense of who they are' (Mumby & Clair, 1997:181). When you think about social reality you also think about language, which is only an aspect of discourse, to express discourses or concepts (Bhaskar, 1979).

In language there are words people use to express their norms, beliefs and values. Thus, 'communication, then, is the substance of organizing in the sense that through discursive practices organization members engage in the construction of a complex and diverse system of meanings' (Mumby & Stohl 1996:58). CR therefore observes the crucial role language plays in social science studies as the social world is essentially linguistic. This means when I think of QA in HE I also think about certain concepts hence the need to consider the various discourses of quality that I discuss in the Literature Review chapter. Therefore, from a CR point of view, the social world is conceptualised reality hence the importance of discourse. Discourses are mechanisms in the sense of enabling and constraining the possibility of certain events to emerge and certain experiences to occur. 'Although it is crucial to note that discourses are not the only mechanisms, this study focuses on these. I unpack this point more in Research Methods. Discourses can help by theorising transformations and creating an awareness 'of what is, how it has come to be, and what it might become, on the basis of which people may be able to make and remake their lives' (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999:4). Therefore, discourse is socially produced and has causal powers in relation to social structures and practices (Fairclough, 2005).

For this research the discursive aspect of the discourse of quality in the world of HE in terms of descriptions and explanations can be translated into language to refer to agents and their causal interactions.

Although this study is not an evaluative study of QA practices and processes in HE in Zimbabwe, it creates awareness in stakeholders' discursive practices in QA which they might not normally be aware of (Reed, 2001). Such awareness presents the potential of human agents to respond to circumstances in which they find themselves, on the basis of meanings that they give to things (or events) or the way they respond creatively to the circumstances in which they find themselves (Lewis, 2000; Snow, 2001). Stakeholders in HE therefore may be able understand their world of HE through the critical eye of their discursive practices, which can empower and transform their QA. However, a critical realist standpoint enables the understanding of the causal mechanisms from which experiences and events in QA in relation to teaching and learning in HE emerge through immanent critique, which Bhaskar argues helps to analyse presuppositions of social practices (Bhaskar, 1979). Immanent critique:

> … assists in evaluating both the empirical behaviour constituting social practices and the explicit self-understanding of their members according to standards that are, in some sense, internal to those practices themselves. By doing so doing immanent critique aims at transformation of such practices that encompasses both action and self-understanding' (Stahl, 2013).

As Bhaskar puts it, immanent critique enhances our reflexivity so that we have a better theory thereby enabling self-examination. CR therefore allows this study to move from the level of reality that we can see and understand, to an understanding of what lies behind what is understood in QA in HE. HE stakeholders are therefore able to reflect on their discursive practices in QA and give a better account of their practices and processes. In the process we are able to give a better account of our world or practices so that we have a better theory and are able to see what we can do better or worse than we are presently doing. This can help transform stakeholder beliefs of quality and QA in teaching and learning in HE. For example, a critical realist standpoint assists in revealing how the how the social structure is critical in providing adequate resource support in order to enhance quality in HE (more can be read in the Literature Review chapter). CR therefore also has a transformative function.

If we can see the real causes of our beliefs, system or structure, and causes which are false, then we can have a negative valuation of beliefs, system or structure (Bhaskar, 1979). From this discussion, due to immanent critique, new beliefs emerge about QA as actions, and perceptions

imposed by those beliefs are transformed. Fundamentally, even in QA in teaching and learning, contexts vary. It is therefore critical to understand why the situation is the way it is and to understand the contextual generative mechanisms. There can be realisation that QA practices and processes work in some contexts and not in others due to different generative mechanisms.

3.8 Conclusion

In order to ground a research study on critical realist ontology, I have argued that there are always multiple discourses at play regarding any phenomenon and these discourses can be causal mechanisms in the generation of events. I have therefore attempted to place discourse within a critical realist view of the social world. That is to say, the fact that discourse can be a causal agent is real in QA in HE. Also, a critical realist standpoint provides an opportunity to look beyond the surface appearances of discursive practices to discover the implicit QA practices. I needed a theory that would consistently dialogue with the CR philosophy, and critical discourse analysis (CDA) would productively do that. I discuss CDA next. It will be shown how the use of CR is capable of revealing the negative and the exciting truth about QA in HE with new theory emerging.

Chapter 4

Quality assurance in Higher Education

4.1 The quality debate in higher education

Issues of quality assurance in universities have been brought to the fore as 'today, more than ever before in human history, the quality of higher education determines the wealth of nations (Bernhard, 2012). Most national governments around the world have deliberately established organisations or structures to regulate quality in HE (Woodhouse, 2012; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2007). This implies that most governments and policy makers are expressing concern about quality of HE in their respective countries. In this chapter I look at the discourse of quality from a Fairclough's critical discourse analysis perspective.

Graduates are valued on the basis of their current or previous higher education institutions (HEIs) (Walsh & Byrne, 2013). Phrases which could cumulatively form the idea of an 'excellent' university are 'good teaching', 'useless department', 'good education', and 'prestigious university' and are common in HE discussions. One of the reasons behind such discourses is the portrayal of some HE as either of high or low quality. Such sentiments may reflect that 'quality' in HE is steadily gaining importance despite its being widely regarded as a complex issue (Walsh & Byrne, 2013).

Quality in HE is a 'notoriously ambiguous term' (Pounder, 1999:158) and rather a 'vague and controversial concept' (Cheng and Tam, 1997:23). What really constitutes quality and who should define it are highly contested issues in HE. Quality may mean different things to different people depending on circumstances and issues that are prevailing at particular times (Harvey & Green, 1993). Burrows & Harvey (1992) ascribe a different perception of quality to each of the stakeholders in HE (including students, employers, parents, teaching and non-teaching staff, government, funding agencies, and professional bodies). Quality, therefore is relative to the user of the term and the circumstances in which it is examined. Indeed the same person may adopt different conceptualisations at different moments. This raises the issue of 'whose quality?' (Harvey & Green, 1993:10).

Despite the controversy that surrounds quality, Ball's (1985) frustrations when he asks the question 'What the hell is quality?' require responses; these are available in literature. Stensaker and Rosa (2007:4) observe the differences of the discourse of quality, remarking that:

> .... politicians, academics, students, employers and other stakeholders may have different views; each of these groups of stakeholders among themselves may have different views. The variety seems boundless and leads back to Ball's exasperated reaction.

In an effort to address the query, Harvey and Green (1993) identify five discourses that capture some existing understandings of quality. They propose following discursive constructions of quality: quality as *exceptional;* quality as *perfection* (or consistency); quality as *fitness for/of purpose;* quality as *value for money; and* quality as *transformation*, as depicted in Figure 4.1 below.

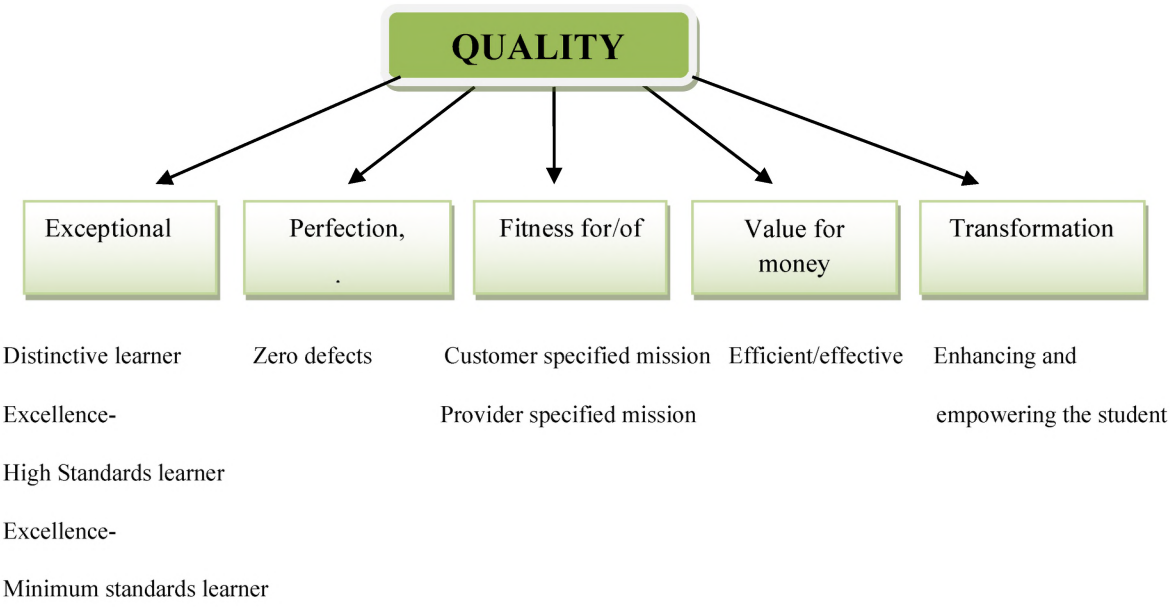

Figure 4.1: Definitions of quality (Adapted from Watty, 2003:215)

In addition to the five discursive constructions of quality that are identified by Harvey and Green, I include a sixth discourse, i.e. quality as *culture*. I explicitly discuss the six discourses of quality with the CR and CDA frameworks thereby working from the position that discourses are mechanisms.

4.1.1 Discourse of quality as *exceptional*

One traditional discourse of quality has been that of *exceptional*. The exceptional discourse sees quality as something special, distinctive and elitist, and is linked to notions of excellence, a high quality that is unattainable by most (Rowley, 1996; Reynolds, 1986). According to this perception, quality can be achieved if the standards are distinguished (Harvey, 1999), while the

notion has exclusivity implications (Pfeffer & Coote, 1991). The exceptional discourse implies that such HE is second to none in terms of its excellence and high standards. Exceptional quality is therefore realised when HE has passed a given set of quality checks (Harvey & Green, 2006). 'Quality is thus attributed to all those items that fulfil the minimum standards set by the monitoring body' (Harvey & Green, 2006:12). Thus quality is reflected if a HEI meets or exceeds certain criteria or certain benchmarks[14] that are provided as forms of measurements of quality by means of comparing different HEIs.

Admittedly, distinctiveness and inaccessibility of elitist education for most people can itself be 'quality', making exceptionality dependent on individual notions. The notion of quality as synonymous with exceptionality emphasises the availability of a correct educational environment that enables the production of best results, whereby excellence (quality) is judged by the reputation of the HEI and availing of the best and adequate resources (Støren & Aamodt, 2010). A counterargument suggests that students may attend universities in a given system because of perceptions that the system is of high quality and enjoys a high reputation (Blackmur, 2007).

In the exceptional perspective of quality, HEIs are equal but 'some are more equal than others' (Barnett, 1992:48) due to a semblance of superiority over others. Admittedly, institutional rankings may be unavoidable from the exceptionality perspective. HE has to be measurable to international standards by embracing comparability (Beach, 2013). This is an approach that Jackson and Lund (2000) note can inculcate competition that can lead to improvement of quality of HE. This means that by other institutions following the 'top' model HEIs, there can assumedly be marked improvements in quality.

Barnett (2004:64) attacks the idea of exceptionality as 'standing for no purpose, no ideal and no concept in particular'. This traditional view of quality 'provides no definable means of determining quality' (Harvey & Green, 2006:11) while the view obscures the meaning of quality (Pfeffer & Coote, 1991). What these authorities imply is that exceptionality is an 'empty' discourse. It is therefore a discursive construction of quality that tends to confuse. The exceptionality discourse exposes the heterogeneous perceptions of quality. Exceptionality can

[14] Benchmarking is a 'process for evaluating…organizations that are recognized as representing the best practices for the purpose of organizational improvements' (Splendolini, 1992:6). Vlăsceanu, Grünberg, & Pârlea, 2007). This can also be referred to as 'external reference' to another institution or entity, or a part thereof. Within a HEI one unit can still be compared to another unit (Bogan & English, 1994).

be 'defined differently depending upon the criteria – or indicators/weightings used' (Hazelkorn, 2008:14). Effectively therefore, exceptionality remains a largely meaningless discourse as it can only be contextualised.

Church (1988) also criticises the exceptionality discourse, arguing that it sees quality and standards as inextricably linked while the discourse implicitly assumes that 'standards' are 'objective' and static (Walsh, 1991). Circumstances change hence standards have to be continuously negotiated, which may be a challenge. Therefore the exceptionality discourse has its own challenges brought about as attempts are made to define the standards to measure quality. Whose stakeholder interests would be considered? In addition to that it ignores institutional differences in mission and type (Barnett, 1992). It is characterised by comparing institutions to each other through employing specific criteria; this becomes problematic as HEIs can be different, while they may be pursuing different missions altogether.

Excellence as quality has become the subject of political debate. Nash, Jones, Ecclestone & Brown (2008) provides an argument against the discourse of quality as excellence. Nash et al (2008) argues against all HEIs using the same standards irrespective of the differences that may exist among institutions and disciplines. This suggests a focus on individuals', departments' and whole institutions' performance as a measure for quality with emphasis on their own unique circumstances and their intentions. For example, a university that has as its goal the provision of vocational education and industry-relevant research would require very different standards to one that has social critique and critical citizenry as its key aim. To an extent, this concurs with the idea of 'fitness of purpose'.

Nash et al (2008) also criticises excellence for seeking to create the perception of the academic sphere as equivalent to the ideology of the market, where value can be quantified, ignoring the differences that exist among HEIs and even departmental units, arguing this makes it impossible to look at individual performances or even engage into discussions with them. Thus, a university may satisfy all the performance indicators required for excellence and at the same time be an 'intellectual desert' (Nash et al, 2008).

Increasingly, the excellence debate, particularly in relation to research, has led to the emergence of university rankings; with their controversy and criticisms from several directions they are not good measures of comparing HEIs (Berthold, Gösta, & Ziegel, 2007). 'Higher education institutions are using these rankings as a promotion tool that shows their educational, research or business excellence' (Aguillo, Bar-Ilan, Levene & Ortega, 2010). This is a discourse related

to an 'ideal' university. However, some in the academic community judge that university rankings use bad criteria, although 'Governments are swayed by them, universities fall out over them and vice-chancellors have even lost their jobs because of them' (Attwood, 2009:10). There is little consensus in how to measure that quality in terms of indicators and weightings. Rankings emphasise some aspects of the activities and performance of universities at the expense of others (Elken, Hovdhaugen, & Stensaker, 2016). Thus criticism concentrates too much on research, and not enough on teaching; too much attention is paid to quantitative rather than qualitative data. Which weight values should be used remains a vexing question. Added to that, HE systems are not directly comparable (Liu & Cheng, 2005). In a recent study Piro, Hovdhaugen, Elken, Sivertsen, Benner & Stensaker (2014) have shown that the age and size of an institution may influence ranking position. However, despite their criticisms, rankings tell us something about 'who institutions are' and 'who they should be' in terms of how to improve them and use them wisely.

4.1.2 Discourse of quality as *perfection* (or consistency)

There is also a discourse of quality as *perfect*, consistent or of flawless outcome (Rowley, 1996; Harvey, 1995). Proponents of quality as perfection believe that there has to be an emphasis on 'zero defects' (Crosby, 1979). There are no defects tolerated as players conform to particular predefined and measurable specifications (Harvey & Green, 2006). Peters and Waterman (1982) stress that, where perfection is stressed in an effort to prevent any defects, conformation is stressed at every stage as players comply with the specifications to a level of realising 'zero defects'.

The challenge with the quality as perfection/consistence discourse is when an organisation places an emphasis on 'zero defects'. This approach is largely inapplicable to the HE sector. HE does not aim at producing standardised, and free of defects graduates (Watty, 2003). Thus HE does not strive to produce homogeneous graduates. In fact, 'it is not the aim of the university to produce identical graduates' (Parri, 2006:107). For instance, although a university may enrol highly qualified students for different programmes offered, that does not guarantee achievement of first class degrees by all the graduates. 'Higher education is not about delivering specifications in as near a perfect way as possible,' but about developing a critical and analytic individual (Harvey & Green, 2006:16).

4.1.3 Discourse of quality as *fitness for/of purpose*

Fitness for/of purpose is another perception of quality in which quality is judged. Fitness of purpose can be defined as the extent to which the object or service of an organisation fits its purpose (Ball, 1985). Fitness for purpose places emphasis on the institutions fulfilling their clearly stated missions (or their purposes), while they have to be efficient and effective in meeting the goals which they have set for themselves (Harvey & Green, 1993). Fitness for purpose enables 'institutions to identify their own mission against how well they fulfil self-imposed intentions' (Harvey, 2009:6) or fulfil their stated objectives or mission (Sallis & Hingley, 1991). For a HEI, whenever something performs as is intended, it is fit for the purpose of the responsibility it assumed and hence it offers quality service or product.

Then there is the dimension of quality as fitness of purpose linked to the adequacy of the intentions of an institution, that is, the extent to which the self-identified purpose is fitting (appropriate) to the institution's context. In the case of the national context of South Africa, fitness of purpose is about the extent to which a university sees its purpose as related to social transformation. In a way, questions are asked whether the institution 'does the job it was designed to do'. In summary, a fitness for/of purpose approach therefore begins with the analysis of the stated purpose of a higher education institution or a programme (mission statement), while also asking whether or not this purpose is an acceptable purpose of higher education (fitness of purpose). That is, when there is quality in a university, it will have successfully achieved its aims and objectives (Harvey & Green, 1993).

In the fitness of/for purpose discourse it is a prerequisite that a HEI needs to redefine its position for the future (i.e. its *vision*) as well as its purpose as an organisation (mission). The institution needs to respond and adapt so that it is able to act (Amaral, Jones & Karseth, 2002) as required by the new demands. This means it is vital that the institution's mission statement is revisited as this provides the internal and external definition of the university, which may require change with time and circumstances. A redefined mission will redefine the purpose of a university and its new goals while that will give the institution direction on how those goals are going to be met. Thus, through adequate control mechanisms and an effective monitoring system, a HEI can attempt to implement changes to its plan whenever necessary. Periodic self-assessment[15],

[15] Assessment is an evaluation that results in graded judgements about quality (Dill, 2000). The 'how good are your outputs?' is the kind of question has to be answered through assessment (Kis, 2005). The output of an

which can be regarded an internal audit[16], can improve the performance of different sub-units and units to achieve the mission and purpose of the institution as a whole. All the constituents of the HEI can be subjected to self-scrutiny within themselves with a clear objective to find options to improve themselves. That can give them the opportunity to continually replenish, renew and reconstitute themselves whenever it is necessary (Barnett, 2000). The organisation may restate its purposes, activities, and goals. It can pursue or even discontinue some of its purposes, activities and goals when it is necessary to do so.

The non-comparability approach thus promotes institutional diversity as against conformity to set standards[17]. Unlike other definitions that can be subjected to institutional comparisons, the fitness for/of purpose perspective needs no requirement that an institution's quality is subject to comparison with another institution's statement of quality. Additionally it can be argued that HEIs are granted a level of autonomy as this approach rules out comparisons of HEIs. In fitness for/of purpose, 'no explicit cross-institutional judgments need to be undertaken' (Barnett, 1992:52). Instead, 'diversity of institutions having different missions and subject focuses ...' (Harvey, 2002:14) is emphasised, and also individuality of purpose and operation with non-comparability of HEIs. Therefore institutional goals and objectives of an individual HEI can be deemed as the lens through which the quality is analysed in an institution or programme a HEI offers. It is therefore crucial to develop a shared concept of what the purpose of each university is within its context and to evaluate quality as the extent to which it is achieving its negotiated purpose (which is a relativist and non-comparative approach).

Although the fitness for/of purpose perspective has widely been adopted in the HE sector (Harvey & Green, 2006), it has its own imperfections that must be borne in mind for appropriate adoption. Harvey (2008) argues that a HEI or institutional unit cannot solely be judged on its

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assessment is a quantitative evaluation, a grade (whether numeric, literal or descriptive) (Woodhouse, 1999:32). An assessment is sometimes called an evaluation.

[16] Audit (sometimes called 'review') verifies the suitability and conformity of the planned quality procedures in relation to the stated objectives. It also includes the effectiveness of the activities in achieving the stated objectives. (Woodhouse, 1999)

[17] A standard can be defined as a criterion, gauge or yardstick by which judgments or decisions may be made (Vroeijenstijn, 1995) or 'a definite level of excellence or attainment' (Sadler, 2005:189). Standards can be described as a statement in general or specific terms of the knowledge, understanding, skills and attitude to be demonstrated by successful graduates (Vroeijenstijn, 1995). A meaningful standard should offer a realistic prospect of determining whether or not one actually meets it (Wojtczak, 2002).

ability to fulfil its mission per se but on whether it complies with national, governmental, disciplinary, professional, or other threshold expectations. Thus, relying solely on its mission for judgements has dangers too. Some of the purposes of HE include the promotion of wider access and the promotion of specialised knowledge and research, geared toward meeting local demands for liberal education, practical professional training, and service to industry. Some of these purposes may not be covered adequately in some institutional missions. In the case of public HEIs, government on behalf of the taxpayers can have the right to demand the enforcement of some of the stated purposes as public institutions have to be accountable to the government and taxpayers.

Quality as fitness for/of purpose can lead to an institutional evaluation that enables discussion, compromise and a challenge to conclusions regarding quality of HE, including the comprehensiveness and relevance of an institution's purpose, in order to ensure improvements. In some instances, some HEIs may 'have goals that are rather unclear and sometimes contradictory, with poorly understood systems to achieve them' (Hearn, 1996 in Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2005:75). A vaguely stated mission and purpose may give a false picture of quality in a HEI. Consequently, there may be a 'problem of identifying whether the institution is achieving the purposes it set for itself in its mission statement' (Harvey & Green, 2006:19).

Harvey and Knight (1996) problematize the discourse of fitness for/of purpose by asking who defines the 'purpose of HE' and 'how the fitness is measured'. They argue that such a discourse is borrowed from the private sector where the purpose is usually synonymous with meeting customer specifications. In another way of looking at fitness for/of purpose, quality is defined in terms of the extent to which the HEI meets the *customer* specifications in the product or service it provides (Harvey & Green, 2006). There is much debate as to who constitutes the customer in HE as the environment is complex and therefore it is much more difficult to identify the customer (Harvey, 2006). This means the perspective of quality as customer satisfaction raises concerns as HE has a sophisticated clientele. Defining the customer in HE is by itself a contentious concept as there are numerous direct and indirect consumers of HE. Elton (1998) raises a query about who customers in HE are: whether the customer can be the service user of the educational provision (the student), those who pay for the service (the government, parents or guardians), or consumers of the products[18] of HE (the employers). The conception is also

[18] HE can still be regarded as having a multi-product/customer system whereby students can be the purchasers of the HEI products, i.e. the programmes that are offered or the students (i.e. graduates) can be regarded as the products offered in the labour market.

contentious because HE is not a business and so therefore does not have any customers/consumers. To use such language is to invoke a business model of HE that is at odds with understanding HE as a social structure and a public good.

One approach might be that students are perceived as the primary beneficiaries of education hence they have to be regarded as customers (Yeo, 2008). This perspective emanates from the understanding that HEIs are highly competitive in the market with strategies being aggressively developed to satisfy student needs in order to attract a sustainable market share (Joseph and Joseph, 1998). A concern around characterising students as customers becomes a challenge. It also raises questions to label students as customers as they themselves contribute significantly to the educational outcomes as they share responsibility for what they achieve as participants at the end of the educational processes. Most students only realise individual value in HE after successfully graduating with the university degree that brings to a graduate better job opportunities and salaries. Also, because customers are 'always right' and their specifications and requirements have to be fulfilled (Harvey, 2006), it would then be tempting to assume that quality education is giving students what they want. This could potentially include leaving out more intellectually challenging or controversial aspects of the curriculum or any educational aspects students may dislike. Take the students as the consumers of HE, for instance: they are not necessarily well positioned to specify their requirements as course and programme specifications are not always determined by them (Elton, 1998). Specifications are not directly determined (although at times they may be influenced) by students as customers (Harvey, 2006:9). HEIs have been 'accustomed to dictating what they wish to teach and how they will teach it' (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2005). In essence, student requirements in HE are determined by the provider, who is usually the HEI. Therefore, regarding quality as synonymous with fulfilling students as customers' specifications may be just an idealisation in the HE sector.

Yet, from another perspective, students are not only customers but also products of the HEIs and if the external customer (i.e. the employer) is not satisfied with the quality, the product (i.e. the student) may be returned to the manufacturer (HEI) for further inspection (Naumann & Giel, 1995). This is more difficult in HE. In today's world, where the content and pace of university programmes change almost daily, those who have already graduated are never brought back to surrender their degrees for that reason as vested in the Chancellor (Zimbabwe Government, 2006). In today's knowledge economy, new jobs and industries are emerging and shifting all

the time. While medicine and law, for example, might have clear 'industries' many other HE programmes have more tenuous links to specific industries (e.g. marketing, tourism).

Whoever the customer may be in the HE sector, it needs to constantly adopt a re-evaluation strategy of the requirements as customer expectations may change over time (Harvey & Green, 2006). For example, when students are perceived as the customers and there is a national need for an educated workforce, there is also a need for the university to understand the skills needed by the graduates. Using the word 'customer' is loaded with ideology in the education context. It is a powerful discourse term.

4.1.4 Quality as *value for money*

Quality as *value for money* is the fourth understanding of quality identified by Harvey and Green (1993), where quality is seen as judged through the processes or outcomes and at an acceptable cost (Garvin, 1984). The assumption is that if the same outcome can be achieved at a lower cost, or a better outcome can be achieved at the same cost, then this may be done so that the 'customer' has a quality product or service. Governments want to realise massification in HE with minimal extra costs (Harvey & Green, 2006), hence Kogan (1986) notes that central to the value for money perspective is the notion of *accountability*[19]. Accountability concerns institutions taking responsibility for the service they provide and the public money they spend (Harvey, 2008).

Some universities might not expend the provided public funding responsibly and effectively and in a way that provides government with increasing levels of return (Rowlands, 2012). With accountability in HE, HEIs have the obligation to report, explain, and justify to others as well as to answer questions about how the usually scarce national resources have been used, and to what effect (Trow, 1996). There is also need for accountability to the external funders who usually constitute the government, donors and other philanthropists who may want to see appropriate spending of public finance. Also, HEIs need to be more accountable to students (Smith & Morris, 2012) and to justify use of students' monetary contributions to the HEIs in the form of tuition fees and other charges. Increasingly students require value for money for the increasing cost of HE (Harvey, 1999). This partly justifies the sprouting of quality assurance

[19] 'Value for money is a term used to assess whether or not an organisation has obtained the maximum benefit from the goods and services it both acquires and provides, within the resources available to it' (Erlendsson, 2002).

bodies (Lim, 1999), for the purpose of monitoring and improving quality of HE (Brunsson, 2001 in Stensaker, 2007) among other reasons.

This discursive construction of quality has sometimes seemed innocuous. For example the 'austerity measures' being implemented in the EU and especially in the UK have seen major cuts in HE funding. In response to economic crisis, almost all European Union countries have committed to reducing their expenditure on universities (Jongbloed, 2008). In Sweden new universities have insufficient research money and currently suffer a loss of interest from the government (*University World News*, 2015). Governments often call on a 'value for money' discourse of quality to justify such cuts. Austerity measures have led to instances of tighter controls of university budgets while public funding was not only diminishing but also changing in the nature and form in which it is provided (Jongbloed, 2008). Funding increasingly comes with specified requirements in line with the agendas of the funders (typically the state) (Estermann, Nokkala & Steinel, 2011). The issue is not that the funds have to be used for the allocated purposes but rather that the allocated purposes are being tightly dictated, reducing the autonomy of the university in determining how to spend its funds, which is an expected norm.

4.1.5 Quality as *transformation*

The final conception of quality identified by Harvey and Green (1993) is that of *transformation*, which sees quality as a process of qualitative change from one state to another (Harvey, 1999; Harvey & Green, 1993). Harvey and Green (2006) liken quality as transformation of form, such as ice changing to water and subsequently to steam when subjected to heat. Similarly, the notion of quality as transformation in HE is viewed as a process which also entails a change (Harvey & Knight, 1996). 'The transformative notion of quality presupposes a fundamental purpose of higher education' (Harvey & Knight, 1996:15–16). HE is about student 'participation in a process of learning for transformation' (Harvey, 1996:2) through their learning. It is hoped that students will undergo transformative changes as they go through their education. The aim of HE is 'a fundamental change of form' through cognitive and personal growth (Harvey and Green, 1993:24). Referring to the customer debate above, through the transformative perspective students cease to be perceived as customers but are rather seen to be participants in a transformational process. Students' transformative processes can be achieved through *enhancing* and *empowering* HE students as participants in the process of learning (Harvey, 1996). In this understanding of quality, when a HEI greatly enhances and empowers students,

then it is of high quality (Støren & Aamodt, 2010). Enhancing students can be achieved through educational experience, i.e. change through 'knowledge, abilities and skills of students' Harvey & Green, 2006:25). Quality HE can be regarded as one that effects transformative enhancement to the students through added value, i.e. change through 'knowledge, abilities and skills of students' (HMI, 1990 in Harvey & Green, 2006:25).[20] It is fundamental that what is regarded as value is specified. The assessment of student learning outcomes is the key to accomplishing a change that focuses primarily on enhancing student learning (Støren & Aamodt, 2010).

Transformative quality is also reflected through empowerment of students (Harvey & Burrows, 1992). Empowering participants impacts upon their decision-making processes that affect participation. Empowerment can be achieved through 'student feedback evaluation; guaranteeing minimum service standards to students; providing more choice; and developing students' critical reflective ability' (Harvey, 2006:14). In learning processes, students are not there just to assimilate information but to acquire knowledge that they can apply analytically (Harvey, 2006). This means HEIs of high quality can be those that can be able to produce more knowledgeable graduates equipped not only with desirable attitudes and recall of information but also with a wider range of skills that would enable them to better meet life challenges than those they had at the start of the educational experience. Such skills include self-confidence, analysis, diagnosis and problem-solving skills, which are fundamental HE processes. Thus high quality HEIs are also able to induce permanent behavioural change. Such change can have a life-long effect on students.

To achieve students' transformative process HEIs can avail power to the students to be able to set 'standards, endorsing practices, specifying curricula, and so on' (Harvey & Green, 2006:27). Students have to play a significant role in matters that impact on their educational experiences. However, as indicated in the customer debate in this chapter, quality in HE is generally ascertained by none other than the HEIs themselves. HEIs conceive themselves as having the necessary expertise to design and offer programmes based on their professional judgement to decide what works (Nash, Jones, Ecclestone & Brown, 2008). For instance the composition of a student's curriculum of study is largely maintained and controlled by academics who insist

[20] 'Measuring value [added] requires having assessments of students' development or attainments as they begin college, and assessments of those same students after they have had the full benefit of their education at the college. Value added is the difference between their attainments when they have completed their education and what they had already attained by the time they began. Value added is the difference a college makes in their education' (Bennett, 2001).

that only they as professionals have the relevant qualifications 'to judge the subjects that should be studied, and 'in what order, within a particular course' (Perkin, 1984:36–38). To a large extent HEIs perceive themselves as having the responsibility to determine whether a student has acquired the requisite knowledge, skills and attitudes to be able to practise/function at the level of a graduate or professional. It is therefore controversial to what extent students can play a role in influencing decisions in HE matters. While this conception of quality as transformation, as identified by Harvey and Green, is very much about transformation of the individual, there have been other ways of looking at this understanding. In South Africa, for example, quality is often understood as being related to the role an institution plays in transforming society/the nation through 'redress and equity which explicitly seeks to break the apartheid mould of higher education' (Council on Higher Education (CHE) 2004:28). In the South African context transformation therefore refers to the elimination of inequalities in HE that the former apartheid government had imposed.

4.1.6 Quality as *culture*

While the previous five discursive constructions of quality discourses were identified by Harvey and Green, there is another emerging discourse that views quality as *culture* (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008). Quality culture involves a continuous asking of questions: what's going on within my own institution? Could we improve somehow (Eastermann et al, 2011)? This conceptualisation of quality is related to the intrinsic traits of the HEI, in which quality is valued as a driving force behind what everyone does in an organisation. It also means that quality is regarded as the responsibility of every organisational member. Responsibility for culture is devolved to every level of the organisation. For instance, in a university situation, quality is assured at every unit such as the department instead of waiting to check the performance of graduates. 'In a quality culture there is no need to check final output' (Harvey & Green, 2006:16). The central focus is therefore on the behaviour of the people involved in the HEI. Quality is therefore everyone's responsibility. Where performance is unsatisfactory at unit level, the situation is rectified immediately thus ensuring that things are 'done right first time' (Crosby, 1979). This perspective therefore brings about fundamental shifts of mind individually and collectively as stakeholders are passionate with the level of quality they desire in their HEI (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2005). Thus, as Aristotle's common assertion goes, quality is not an act, it is a habit (Facione, 2011).

4.1.7 Overview of the quality debate

'No one definition [of quality] is best in every situation because each definition has both strengths and weakness' (Reeves and Bednar, 1994:427). Different stakeholders and players account for the heterogeneity of the concept of quality in the HE sector 'Politicians, academics, students, employers and other stakeholders may have different views; each of these groups of stakeholders among themselves may have different views' (Westerheijden, Stensaker and Rosa (2007:4). The diversity of views on quality reflects the extent to which the 'quality' concept in HE is a highly contested concept, leaving it largely a conundrum. Given the diversity in perceptions of the concept of quality, it remains 'a matter of negotiation between all parties concerned' (Vroeijenstijn, 1995:14) which may expose it to a compromised description. It also means it is expected that there will be an existence of emphasis on every stakeholder's defined expectations of 'what one thinks is the ideal process of education' (Turner, 2011:3).

Since there is no general consensus on the meaning of quality, stakeholders have legitimate authority to voice their perspectives as quality lies in eyes of the beholder (Vroeijenstijn, 1990; Middlehurst, 2001). Thus quality 'is not a different perspective on the same thing but different perspectives on different things with the same label' (Harvey & Green, 2006:10), as is shown in the different perspectives[21]. 'Our methods of evaluating quality spring from more deep-seated beliefs as to what counts as quality' but 'these beliefs over what counts as quality themselves derive from more fundamental assumptions as to the ideal nature of higher education' (Barnett, 1994:24). The conceptions of quality are represented by discourses: each is a different way of conceiving of the world of HE.

This is underpinned explicitly with the CR and CDA framework. I therefore work from the position that discourses are mechanisms. The emphasis has thus been to indicate how each discourse of quality affects what happens in the university – i.e. showing how each discourse functions as a mechanism (at the level of the real) to constrain or enable what emerges at the level of the actual and the empirical.

[21] 'Our methods of evaluating quality spring from more deep-seated beliefs as to what counts as quality. But, and more significantly, these beliefs over what counts as quality themselves derive from more fundamental assumptions as to the ideal nature of higher education' (Barnett, 1994:24).

4.2 Quality assurance [QA] mechanisms

There are discourses associated with QA. These include accountability, control, compliance, and improvement or enhancement. Accountability, control, compliance, and improvement or enhancement approaches can assist in QA. There is debate about each of these – each comes from a particular ideological position based on how the role of the university is understood and how academics, students and the academic endeavour is discursively constructed. Quite often, these approaches are in tension with one another and represent fundamentally different ideological positions. These approaches emerge out of the different discursive constructions of quality detailed in the previous section.

4.2.1 Accountability

Trow (1996) defines accountability in higher education as the obligation to report, explain, and justify to others as well as to answer questions about how resources have been used, and to what effect. In the case of the higher education sector CHE (2005:7) describes accountability as a 'demonstration by institutions, to the state and to broader society, that they have used public money for the effective achievement of public policy goals'. Accountability may be required to the funders who usually constitute the government, donors and other philanthropists that want to see appropriate spending of public finance (Quinn & Boughey, 2009). This implies that institutions such as universities are therefore liable to render account to the people that contribute to their survival. Bernhard (2009), Gordon (2002) and Davidson (2005) note that there have been diminished resources for the HE sector from the government (taxpayer). They argue that policy makers such as governments may want to know if their funds are spent in a correct and efficient manner, demanding public accountability from institutions for their performance. Thus, in the first place, accountability is usually, if not always, linked to public information and to judgements about the fitness, the soundness or the level of satisfaction achieved (Middlehurst and Woodhouse, 1995). Secondly, accountability is required to the other stakeholders in the HE sector that principles are not being treated with contempt. For instance, university programmes of study have to be organised and run properly. Third is accountability to students who would expect value for their money. HEIs therefore have to have full responsibility for taking care of QA, with accountability to their students and the public at large, and ensure that appropriate educational experience is not just promised but also delivered (Harvey, 2008).

4.2.2 Control

Control is about ensuring the integrity of the higher education sector, in particular making it difficult for poor or rogue providers to continue operating, and making access to the sector dependent on the fulfilment of criteria of adequacy. Varghese (2006) notes a significant private sector participation in HE in Africa, with a growth of private HEIs. In such a situation 'governments seek to control unrestrained growth in higher education in an increasingly unrestricted market' (Harvey, 2008:11). In Zimbabwe, with the establishment of so many universities, private and public, there is a requirement for control to avoid a decline of standards; accreditation is one of the chosen ways to control HE provisions (Garwe, 2012). Shizha and Kariwo (2011) argue that such control can, to some extent, ensure the status and legitimacy of HE in Zimbabwe regarding academic or professional achievement nationally and internationally.

4.2.3 Improvement or enhancement

Improvement focuses less on constraints but more about the encouragement of adjustment and change (Harvey, 2008). The primary focus is on constant development and raising the quality of the HE sector. Quality procedures for improvement purposes aim at promoting future performance rather than making judgements on past performance (Kis, 2005). A focus on improvement requires the exercise of critical self-examination. Thus, self-assessment (also called self-evaluation) serves as a tool for improvement (Harvey, 2008). Where the improvement or enhancement approach is predominant, emphasis is on recommendations (Kis, 2005). Emphasis can be on improving standards, to directly improve the student experience, or to improve the way the HEI monitors its own activities (Harvey, 2008). Billing (2004) notes that the improvement/enhancement approach is typical in those countries where the higher education sector is subject to strong state regulation, as in continental Europe.

4.2.4 Compliance

Compliance means 'ensuring that institutions adopt procedures, practices, and policies that are considered by funders and governments to be desirable for the proper conduct of the sector and to ensure its quality' (Harvey, 2008:12). For example, one of ZIMCHE's roles is to advise on the shape and size of the higher education system as well as the budgeting and funding arrangements for public HEIs (Zimbabwe Government, 2006). Government expectations can

include certain compliances that go beyond financial accountability and include the achievement of policy objectives. Government and funders may expect specific use of allocated funds and fulfilment of certain expectations, such as graduates to satisfy national demand. Where QA bodies such as ZIMCHE in Zimbabwe exist, a university can be under pressure to comply with the QA body's expectations through quality monitoring to check that their preferences or policies are being acknowledged or implemented (Harvey, 2006).

Vroeijenstijn (1995) describes QA as a systematic, structured and continuous attention to quality in relation to its maintenance and improvement. In an effort to implement QA in HE, different mechanisms or 'processes?' of QA are plausible and common, namely internal quality assurance (IQA) or external quality assurance (EQA) systems.

4.3 Internal quality assurance

IQA refers to the policies and mechanisms implemented within the institutions to ensure that they are fulfilling their own purpose and meeting the standards that apply to HE in general or to the relevant profession or discipline (Martin & Stella, 2007). Harvey (1997:134) suggests that the traditional approach to quality assurance[22] was internal, with an emphasis on developing 'excellence' in the programme, department or discipline. Thus it is IQA when QA is carried out by the HEI for the HEI to ensure compliance with local guidelines and regulations. In IQA HEIs tend to collect, analyse and interpret information for QA (Brennan, 1997). The IQA[23] approach was partly influenced by the English model, which emphasised self-governance or regulation through fellows, being an example of quality assessment and assurance by means of peer review (Turner, 2011).

4.3.1 Reasons for IQA

Whether or not it is government agency responsible for QA in HE, typically HEIs put in place their own mechanisms to ensure ways of creating a more realistic picture of how organisational change takes place in terms of quality assurance activities (Stensaker, 2008). IQA involves HEIs and the internal stakeholders such as students and academics; the approach is a collective

[22] QA refers to a 'systematic, structured and continuous attention to quality in terms of quality maintenance and improvement" QA is all-embracing term covering all the policies, processes, and actions through which quality of HE is maintained and developed / enhanced (Vroeijenstijn, 1995).

[23] IQA, self-assessment, self-evaluation or self-study are words quite often used interchangeably.

and reflective practice carried out by a university with the intention of understanding better and improving its own progress toward its objectives, enhancing its institutional effectiveness, and both responding to and influencing positively to the context in which it is operating (Watson & Maddison, 2005). IQA therefore helps the HEIs to check how far they are achieving their strategic missions and goals, while it also allows institutions to prepare action plans for further development and to constantly take a self-critical approach (Harvey & Williams, 2010), as shown represented cyclically as in Figure 4.2 below.

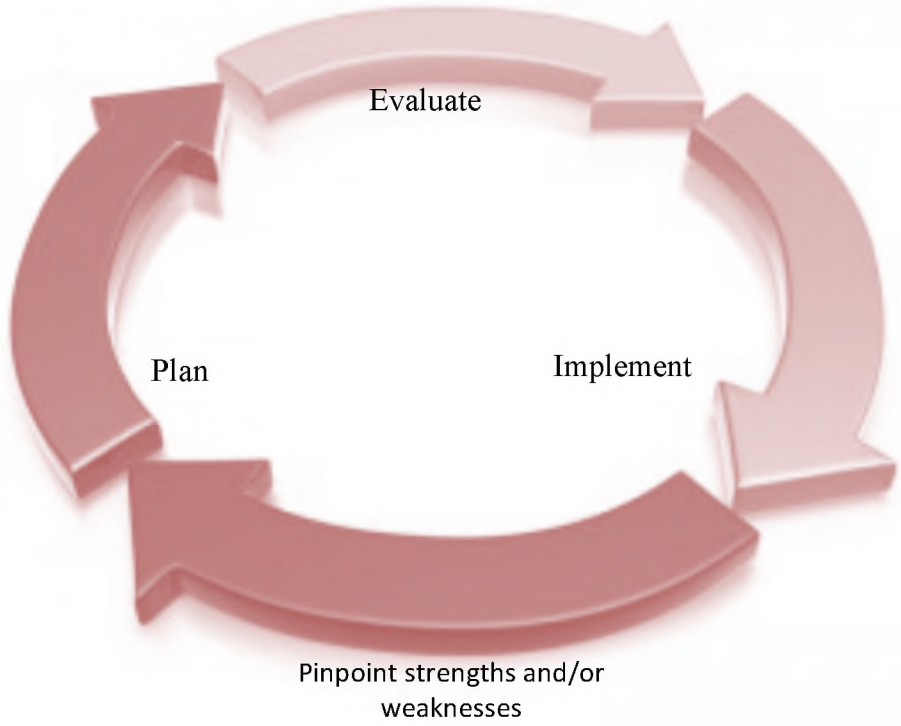

Figure 4.2: The IQA cycle in some universities

As depicted in Figure 4.2, Kis (2005) argues that in contexts where universities' main objective may be quality improvement, they can analyse their strengths and weaknesses and thereafter formulate recommendations for further improvement. However, this may not be always the case as IQA in a strongly hierarchical, managerialist university would be for a different objective (and follow different processes) to IQA in a collegial university. Self-assessments reports as products of IQA provide the stakeholders of HE with valuable information on the institutions

while other institutions can learn from each other's procedures. It is improvement-oriented while it aims at developing the quality within the framework of self-regulation of HEIs (Vroeijentsijn & Acherman, 1990). Since IQA involves insiders, Ceci et al. (in Harvey 2009:6) note that the insiders usually 'provide insight, understand issues and are, therefore, supportive and sharing'. At the same time IQA can be regarded as a more democratic approach to quality assurance as the constituency themselves have some control, which gives the process more chances to be successfully, truthfully and faithfully carried out.

> Quality evaluation gains its greatest justification when, as a result, the actors centrally involved in offering programmes in higher education learn about themselves and, as a result, change, improve and even transform the quality of their own professional activities and services to society (Barnett, 1999:87).

IQA contains no imposed set of procedures hence the HEIs may willingly comply with the procedures to take part in QA processes. This depends on from whose perspective one is looking at it. For some institutions IQA is highly regulated and imposed by management or quality assurance offices onto academics; in others the processes are negotiated in an open manner. So, while IQA might not be imposed from outside, it can be strongly or weakly imposed within the institution. However, self-regulation can allow access to greater expertise and technical knowledge within the HEI that can lead to a possible increased voluntary compliance at a much lower cost (Dill & Beerkens, 2010). IQA is therefore cost effective as it is largely a resource-saving method which does not require, for instance, foreign experts whose knowledge and skills in IQA are non-obligatory.

Through IQA HEIs can continually analyse themselves, that is, to check if they are still sticking to their purposes according to their mission statements and objectives. So since IQA is a self-regulation approach it may enhance quicker adjustment as it can be more readily acceptable than a concept that is conceived from outside (Vroeijentsijn and Acherman, 1990). IQA can give internal members of a HEI (staff and students) the opportunity to review 'what they are about themselves with the hopes that in the process they take into account the wishes of the external stakeholders such as employers' (Barnett, 1992:51).

IQA can enhance institutional quality mechanisms and facilitation of the development of a quality culture. Arguably, IQA can be regarded as a more democratic approach to QA as the constituency themselves have some control, which gives the process more chances for successful and true results of the state of quality in a HEI. The internal stakeholders can uphold or discard any IQA activities if they so wish as they get an opportunity to analyse themselves.

However, this may depend on the extent of managerialism in the institution. In some cases there may well be internal stakeholders with very little control over IQA processes. Nevertheless, this does not imply that IQA always has a fully negotiated participation. Some IQA may require a level of compliance and often the processes are prescribed by management rather than through elected participation by units or departments (Harvey & Williams, 2010).

Students often make up an integral part of the IQA (Harvey & Knight, 1996) and their overall HE experience is crucial (de Jager & Gbadamosi, 2010). IQA can be an internal and team-driven process; dialogue, enjoyment and trust are enhanced among the internal players (Churchman and Woodhouse, 1999). Harvey and Williams (2010) argue that IQA enables the ownership, development and integrity of the HEI provisions, not only by academic staff and non-academic staff but by the students too. Arguably, through the involvement of students, IQA has the potential to assist the development of their critical abilities and control of the pedagogical processes and other provisions offered by the HEI (Harvey & Green, 1992). This means that in some way students also get the opportunity to contribute to the quality assurance process, and know what constitutes quality and how quality in HE can be promoted. It is not uncontested that students can contribute to the QA processes but the question is the extent to which students can influence the processes. Williams and Cappuccini-Ansfield (2007) observe that students' voice regarding quality of HE is now being heard more clearly by most institutions and governments. For instance, the Norwegian Agency of Quality Assurance (NOKUT) involves students in their QA processes. However, students can be conceived differently for QA purposes within institutions. Student participation in QA may be non-existent in some HEIs. As indicated in the *quality as transformation* debate earlier in this chapter, if the institution is drawing on the quality as transformation discourse to develop its IQA approach, then it would be particularly interested in assessing the extent to which their students are indeed being transformed to their full capabilities. Thus institutional leadership usually leads the QA processes with student input not being taken seriously.

Coyle (2003) argues that IQA can address the autonomy and accountability of the university's constituent departments. Some academics fear government intrusion into universities as an undermining of academic autonomy (Henkel, 2007). For instance, the Pennsylvania House of Representatives formed the Select Committee on Academic Freedom in Higher Education, to promote conditions of academic freedom in the state's public HEIs (Bergquist, n.d). This shows that in some places the incursion of the State is increasing, which may potentially be an attack

on the preservation of academic freedom to decide on quality assurance. Academics also prefer making their own independent responsibilities in QA and have a right to define their own strategic plans with regards to QA in their HEI. Arguably, some academics may therefore regard themselves as under attack when external players interfere in institutional QA with themselves possibly subjected to irreparable damage through abrupt enforcement of alien and inappropriate requirements from external players (Wright, 1989).

4.3.2 Conducting IQA

It may be rather futile to talk about EQA without focusing attention on the internal process, i.e. the IQA (Harvey & Newton, 2004). In IQA a HEI can have a team that monitors the HEI's educational activities, along with their administrative services, to improve their quality and to get approval and recognition of their quality levels from the independent 'external examiners' (Bayraktar, Tatoglu & Zaim, 2013). Cheng & Tam (1997) suggest that an IQA team involves players that are found within the HEI, like the current students and front line staff. All the internal stakeholders can first be sensitised on the importance of IQA in the university. Unfortunately, not all academics may be willing to work in IQA teams (Harvey & Newton, 2004). To carry out successful IQA, Ewell (2010) advises HEIs to make a plan based on the institution's principles of quality. To justify the required time and resources for IQA, careful planning is a prerequisite.

Timeframe to achieve specific objectives and tasks to be attended to in the IQA can be discussed and agreed upon (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2005). It is also crucial that IQA members thoroughly understand their roles and responsibilities as to who will do what, and when and how are agreed upon. This may assist in avoiding hitches to the IQA implementation, e.g. role conflict in IQA processes. It is necessary to involve persons that have direct responsibility in the delivery of a programme in a unit. IQA members will be responsible for collecting information and data regarding quality in HEI. They will also be clear on the value and use of the data they will collect.

A necessary and important part of IQA involves making a judgement to determine whether a practice in a HEI is good or of benefit for the maintenance or attainment of quality of HE in an institution. Thus if something is assisting in the achievement of desired results it can be pursued, or discarded if it is of no benefit to the institution. IQA therefore, although merely descriptive of a HEI, can contain explicit statements that reflect self-critical analysis thereby becoming

improvement oriented. The IQA can from the beginning decide how the compilation and submission of the report and the making of judgements will take place.

4.3.3 Challenges of IQA

IQA has its own potential drawbacks despite some notable benefits discussed above. The idea of external authorities getting responsibility for quality in HEIs was partly due to the academics' preoccupation with the creation of conducive environments for themselves (Turner, 2011). This is a contested area as academics are also employees who deserve the conducive working environment to improve their performance within the job for the benefit of the HEI and the achievements of its objectives. However, self-regulation, if carelessly implemented, may lack public accountability and transparency. Since those involved in IQA are insiders in the HE system, there is a potential the IQA players can be 'biased, prejudicial, and amateurish' …destructive and pernicious' (Ceci & Peters et al. in Harvey, 2009:6) when they get involved in IQA of another HEI as peer reviewers. Universities can at times be blamed for appointing their friends of academics as evaluators so as to avoid real scrutiny, ending up serving their private interest rather than public interest (Harvey & Williams, 2010). It can therefore be difficult to expect institutions to conduct a truly critical self-analysis. HEIs may perceive honest self-assessments as dangerous. Consequently, the self-assessment reports may be biased, superficial, or at least subject to cosmetic treatment. However, (Ross, 2006) notes that self-assessment reports obtained through IQA provide a stimulating experience to HEI staff while Stensaker (1999) concludes that the reports do not profit the university but act as mere preparation for external reviews[24]. Additionally, due to a shift to more managerialist approaches in some universities, even IQA can be external to the department, management or faculty when managed by the IQA team. Therefore challenges that I outlined in EQA can still be encountered in IQA processes. In such circumstances QA might not be imposed on the university by some external stakeholders but within the university; however some departments might experience this as imposed by university management, hence IQA may still be resisted by some internal stakeholders.

[24] IQA generally gives a starting point for external reviewers to assess the institution or programme (O'Mahony & Garavan, 2012).

Although students are viewed as significant players in IQA, it is not always an easy task to incorporate them in the process. The literature suggests that academics can be reluctant to involve students and have little faith in their feedback (Harvey & Williams, 2010). Some academics' reputations may be at the mercy of students while conceptions of quality may also make IQA implementation more difficult. Over and above, some students have been found to sometimes reluctantly participate with little enthusiasm or not at all in IQA processes (Harvey & Williams, 2010). This will mean that some student participation in and responses to IQA may be compromised, with the potential of failing to show the true reflection of the status of quality in a HEI. This study focuses on quality assurance in universities through ZIMCHE. Thus while EQA approach is most relevant to my research study, it involves participation of staff from quality assurance units in universities. IQA is therefore an important discourse of quality assurance through ZIMCHE.

4.4 External quality assurance [EQA]

Governments or legalised regulatory bodies and HEIs in most countries have an interest in QA in HE (Vroeijenstijn, 1995). External quality assurance (EQA)[25] covers a variety of quality-related evaluation that is undertaken by bodies or individuals that are external to HEIs (Harvey, 2008). EQA is undertaken or driven by outside agencies pursuant to government regulation or requirement (Middlehurst, 2001). EQA is undertaken or driven by outside agencies pursuant to government regulation or requirement (Middlehurst, 2001). Harvey (2008:6) notes that external quality assurance would help with the 'checking of compliance with government policy, or ensuring accountability', usually of the taxpayers' money.

The origins of EQA in HE could have partly been influenced by different models such as the 'State Control Model' that is 'characterized by strong confidence in the capabilities of government actors and agencies to acquire comprehensive and true knowledge and to take the best decisions' (Vught, 1989) and check that HEIs comply 'with government policy or ensuring accountability' (Harvey, 2008:6).

[25] EQA is also referred to as external review.

4.4.1 Reasons for the emergence of EQA

Although IQA was the traditional approach to QA in HE, the incapability of HEIs to satisfy the qualitative and quantitative needs of society led to loss of confidence on the traditional academic education quality management capacity of the institutions (Li, 2010). Torres and Schugurensky (2002) observe that after the decline of socialist and welfare-state models, neoliberal regimes have become hegemonic in many parts of the world. They observe that the neoliberal era has forced 'changes in financial arrangements, coupled with accountability mechanisms' (2002:429). This implies that universities have had to reconsider the relationship between the university and the state in a neoliberal era with regard to their social missions, academic priorities and organisational structures. This era has therefore brought about a greater concern as to accountability and the ways in which state funds in HE are used.

The purpose of the university has shifted in the 'knowledge economy' and so there is an increasing demand that the university efficiently provides skilled labour for the workforce; emphasis is rightly placed on how higher education can better serve society and how this too has led to the emergence of EQA (Marginson, 2007). The CR stance is that events (e.g. EQA) emerge out of the interplay of multiple mechanisms. A lack of trustworthiness of IQA led external stakeholders to change their perceptions of HEIs as entities that could regulate themselves. Stakeholders 'outside the academic institutions saw it as part of their concern, and within their sphere of competence, to evaluate the quality in universities' (Turner, 2011:2). These events have enabled EQA to very rapidly take hold of the higher education sector.

The takeover of the higher education sector by EQA has had its own fissures. Some internal stakeholders viewed it as threat to discourses such as that of academic freedom (Luckett, 2007). Tight (1988:132) explains that 'academic freedom refers to the freedom of individual academics to study, teach, research and publish without being subject to or causing undue interference'. Similarly, Caston (2006:307) defines academic freedom as 'the freedom of the individual academic to teach, to do research, and to publish without any interference externally'. This research study focuses on quality assurance through ZIMCHE, a body that can be perceived as primarily external and an imminent threat arising from its official policies interfering in university affairs. However, du Toit (2000:103) argues that the threat to academics can be internal as 'it can be tied up with the actual practices of university communities themselves and their possibly defective understanding of academic freedom'. Shils (1995:8) warns that there are limits to academic freedom, pointing out that 'academic freedom is not the freedom of

academic individuals to do just anything, to follow any impulse or desire, or to say anything that occurs to them'.

'Confidence is gained through the confirmation by others of the self that one is projecting' (Barnett, 2000:100). Similarly, quality in universities could be bolstered through outsiders' confirmation, hence the need for external quality assurance (EQA). EQA involves QA agencies or anybody outside the institution that have to assess HIEs' operations or those of their programmes in order to determine whether they meet the agreed or predetermined standards[26] (Martin & Stella, 2007).

To realise effectiveness in EQA, individuals with adequate knowledge in HE can be appointed to participate in EQA processes. Those assigned the responsibility or appointed to an agency may have 'interest and enthusiasm in taking forward higher education endeavour' (Harvey, 2000:7). There is also the concern that quality body members appointed on political inclination may portray the HE system in a rosy light so as to give false credit to policies of the political powers of the day. Those appointed according to political inclination will primarily 'represent the views of the party not the direct concerns of the constituency' (Harvey, 2009:5). Thus the appointees can be expected to have the necessary responsibilities, competency and expertise in 'quality' while institutions have to achieve the best possible outcome from external reviewers, avoiding presenting falsehoods to impress the government, parent ministry or other stakeholders about the quality of HE in the country or HEIs. It is unfortunate that EQA has problems in finding motivated individuals as external reviewers (Brennan, 1997). In addition to this, external quality agencies are usually composed of members with conflicts of interest, having expectations that are usually not unitary and coherent (Gornitzka, 1999).

From a government's perspective, Gordon (2002:98–99) notes that 'public accountability of the use of public funds has contributed to the introduction of external monitoring and assessment'. HEIs have to ensure they give evidence of optimum use of public funds, and provide proven quality to demonstrate fair use of tax revenues (Kohler, 2009). This has become so important because there has been a shift in the ways in which the university is perceived and a shift in the relationship between the university and the state. There has been a call for increased accountability, which is tied to the idea that the state pays for HE in order to be provided with an educated workforce for the knowledge economy. That makes external quality

[26] Standards are both a fixed criterion against which an outcome can be compared as well as a level of attainment (Harvey, 2004).

processes predominantly a compliance approach (Davidson, 2005). Gosling & D'Andrea, 2005:11) criticise the compliance role but stress the need for a role 'that functions to improve the quality of the educational experience'. Hodgson (2008) also attacks external quality activities as they deprive staff of 'the time, scope and confidence to try new things defined by themselves and not by external drivers'. Thus application of accountability from the external organisations may lead to compliance, leaving no room for innovation and improvement.

There has also been the motivation for external quality assurance bodies to be set up due to the national desire to attain a special status (accreditation)[27] in order to gain an advantage in an environment where there is competition for students, funding or access to specific funding (Martin & Stella, 2007). Thus EQA ensures the integrity of HE. Although this is the rationale for EQA, that differs between countries and regions (Stensaker & Harvey, 2011). EQA makes an effort to make sure that the programmes of study in institutions of higher education are organised and run properly, and that an appropriate educational experience is both promised and delivered (Harvey & Newton, 2004). It is common that, in most countries where new institutions and programmes are established, the external quality body carries out assurance procedures first so as to accredit the new HEI. It is expected that, if the HEI does not meet the EQA expectations, accreditation may fail, while through quality reviews anomalies may lead to some programmes or the institution itself being closed, which gives integrity to higher education. However, Stensaker and Leiber (2015) outline some conditions, which are not exclusive, that need to be met for EQA to succeed. Unique characteristics of the individual institutions are emphasised, including its identity; trust becomes an important feature to improve the quality of each individual higher education institution; academic leadership is consulted and included in EQA; communication and information dissemination are treated as a very important part of activities; and cooperation among staff is cherished and prioritised. Kells (1999:210) adds that universities act more maturely if they are treated as 'trusted adults' than as 'children'; they seize responsibility for evaluation and self-regulation.

[27] Accreditation is the establishment of a status, legitimacy or appropriateness of a HEI, programme or module of study (Barnett, 2004). Obtaining accreditation may have implications for the HEI itself, e.g. permission for the HEI to operate and/or its students' eligibility for grants (Woodhouse, 1999).

4.4.2 Conducting EQA

This thesis focuses on quality assurance through ZIMCHE, an external quality assurance body. It is therefore relevant to look at issues that regard EQA. The process that any external QA bodies employ may, to a large extent, hinge on the discourses that are called upon to construct quality. If, for instance, the fitness for purpose discourse is drawn upon, then external quality assurance will dwell on the 'ways in which higher education institutions (HEIs) or programmes fulfill the objectives they aim to achieve' (UNESCO, 2011:7). However, different discourses can co-exist in harmony or in tension with each other. Therefore, people with the power may draw on one discursive construction of quality to develop EQA processes while other groups of people, who have less power but who may be called upon to comply with the EQA, might be drawing on very different discourses.

Practices of conducting EQA differ but there are some essential guidelines that UNESCO (2010) provided. The HEI submits its self-assessment report, which is a product of IQA, to a team of external reviewers that is usually knowledgeable in the area of HE. To demonstrate international equivalence, the team may also include international reviewers who, however, may present limited availability as the costs might be prohibitive (UNESCO, 2010).

Although approaches may differ, EQA can include an analysis of the institutional conditions under which certain results could have been attained, and that provides an external view (Woodhouse, 1999). Therefore the external reviewers analyse the self-assessment review report and validate its claims generally by visiting the HEI. In most countries, UNESCO (2010) observed that reviewers collect information through site visits to the HEI and interviewing some internal stakeholders (and sometimes external stakeholders too) of the HEI. Information can also be obtained from stakeholders such as current students, alumni and employers through questionnaires (Thune, 1996). The visit by the review panel gives the HEI an opportunity to discuss and find ways of consolidating and improving the academic environment, as provided in the review report. Frequently the visit by an outsider provides a different view about the quality and also, frequently, this becomes a validation of the conclusions drawn by the HEI from a self-study.

Based on the recommendations of the reviewers, the decision is then taken to the parent ministry (i.e. on behalf of the government) or a professional body, which then may or may not publish

the report of the state of quality in a HEI as in the case of an audit[28] or accreditation (Billing, 2004). In Zimbabwe, ZIMCHE as an EQA body reports to the higher education ministry but exists as an outside independent body (Garwe, 2012). In the case of EQA carried out for accreditation purposes, a simple yes or no answer may be provided. At times a yes may be issued with certain conditions (Woodhouse, 1999). Where a 'no' is issued, an appeal can usually be made where the HEI disagrees with the results of the EQA. Typically a decision can be postponed until corrective action is completed.

Woodhouse (1999) argues that EQA process has high cost implications in terms of time and finance while the process is characterised by poor follow-up procedures. It is alleged that in some cases external quality reviewers simply rely on what HEIs self-report, which they only endorse, implying that EQA exists on paper only. Maassen (2000) observes that EQA has entered into the HE area in a superficial manner and has proved less effective than expected by most stakeholders.

4.5 Data as measures of quality in QA

There is an argument that there has to be a level of requirements and conditions that can be met by HEIs for them to be regarded as being of quality (Brew & Boud, 1992). Thus there is advocacy for use of data as proxy measures of quality in quality assurance. However, Luckett (2007:1) argues that there is 'no yardstick at our disposal to measure the quality of education'. Vroeijenstijn (1995:18) argues that 'standards and criteria are a matter of bargaining and negotiating between the parties involved' and 'what is generally accepted as quality is a matter of opinion'. Therefore, quality is really an empty concept, and in the case of higher education its purpose must be crucial (Barnett, 1999). Despite the disagreements, there are data that are both quantitative and qualitative in nature that at least tell us something about quality despite the controversies. These are data (qualitative and quantitative) used to measure quality that are indeed proxies for quality if they are there in the appropriate amounts or degrees. For example, if in the student interviews the students say they love their courses and their professors then we might say that the teaching is good. But we have not actually assured the quality of assessment or teaching, we have used proxies for these activities to assure the quality.

[28] A quality audit checks the extent to which the institution is achieving its own explicit or implicit objectives (Woodhouse, 1999). Thus there are no comprehensive reviews of HEIs through quality audits but checking if the processes are effective.

The quantitative data provides all sorts of perspectives on 'what' and 'how many' type of questions (Dey, 2005). Thus quantitative data can be counted or expressed numerically rather than through interpretation, e.g. the number of lecturers in a department. Undeniably, such data can be observed and verified. Although numbers cannot be dismissed in their entirety as quantitatively they send messages, Barnett (1992:54) argues against the over-reliance on quantitative data in QA as 'quality of higher education, like the quality of wine, cannot be adequately described in numbers'. It is therefore imperative to get 'behind the numbers' that are contained in quantitative data to appreciate the real social experience (Engel & Schutt, 2010). It is also imperative to focus on the interpretation of the meanings of the quantifiable phenomena (Engel & Schutt, 2010). This is qualitative data that can provide valuable information about quality of HE in a university as its analysis mostly leads us to questions of 'why' and 'how' (Dey, 2005). The challenge with qualitative data is characterised by its failure to be able to be judged true or false and the fact that it is subject to possible different interpretation among many (Patton, 2002).

Quantitative and qualitative data that are relevant in QA are shown in Figure 4.3 below and discussed thereafter. The quantitative and qualitative aspects are contained in the discussion that follows as those are crucial in both discourses. It critical to note that there several key issues and debates in the quantitative and qualitative aspects that could be included in this general conceptual framework, but I only discuss the academics, physical structures, ICTs, institutional governance, financial resources, rapport, graduates, research production, and programme completion and drop-out rates. These are not exclusive discourses that impact quality of higher education.

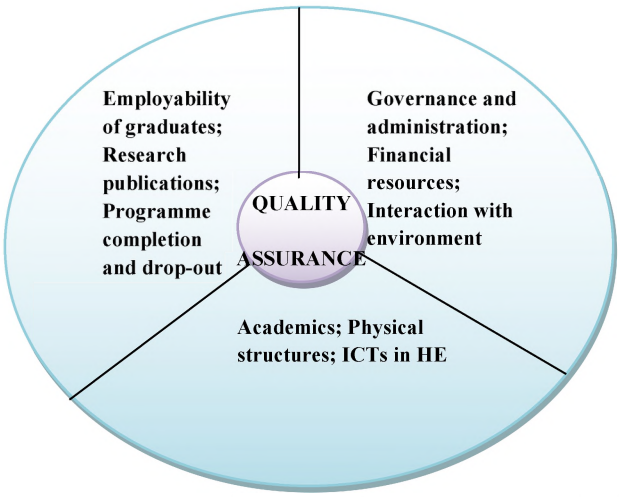

Figure 4.3: Quantitative and qualitative as measures of quality in QA

4.5.1 Quality of academics

Quality of the academics contributes to the quality in a HEI. Academics' qualifications and research records are imperative. Altbach (2009) argues that no university can achieve quality without well-qualified and committed academic professionals, while a relationship between academics' qualifications and quality enhancement in HE may not be doubted (Barnett, 1992). There is an assumption that there is a relationship between academics' qualifications, research records and effective teaching (Barnett, 1992). Thus correlation between effective teaching and research cannot be entirely dismissed, and no university can achieve quality without a well-qualified academe with intellectual leadership (Altbach, 2009; Giroux, 2006). This is the quality aspect of academics, although it raises controversial debate on the nature of the relationship between qualifications and teaching in higher education. In research regarding the relationship between research and education Elken & Wollscheid (2016) conclude that the relationship is positive. The implication is that academic qualifications are key to quality but the relationship is not straightforward. Some may wonder if qualifications should matter if teachers are really good and know enough about the content at the level at which they teach. An opposing view is that academics that are recruited in universities need to be capable of getting the job done through acquiring or having acquired appropriate qualifications. However, the relationship between research and teaching is rather weak, with some believing that there is no or little relationship (Hattie & Marsh, 1996).

Academics play a critical role in ensuring that there is quality of HE and if they are found lacking this can endanger the ability of the universities to function well (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). While the academics' qualifications do matter, the size of staff complement is equally critical in terms of matching the student numbers enrolled. Thus, in terms of quantities, the number of university teachers need to be sufficient to carry the workload demands of the institutions to avoid increased pressure. Academic–student ratios have to be manageable to enable persons to do tasks with few constraints (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). However, in their research study on the impact of class size on the performance of university students, Bandiera, Larcinese and Rasul (2010) conclude that the effect of increasing class size in tertiary education is not well understood. Fundamentally, HEIs need to avoid unmanageable student–lecturer ratios but, instead, place an emphasis on reasonable academic–student ratios that allow effective interaction whenever there is need for consultation and one-to-one meetings. Quality of HE can be enhanced when academics are able to cater for the goals and needs of the individual students. Yet Manyukwe (2008) observes that there is a critical shortage of qualified staff throughout

universities in the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) region due to poor working conditions. A SADC report (2010) notes that SADC is battling to stem the flight of highly-skilled professionals to the developed countries. Clark (2004) also notes that there are decreased numbers of individuals who answer the call to join the academic professionals. In addition, Enders (2007) observes that there are few full-time academic appointments in many countries. To mitigate such shortages, OECD (2012) suggests recruiting academics from across the national borders as such action does not only address the scarcity of academics but would also assist students to understand multiple perspectives and analyses of practices, and gain respect for multicultural diversity. However, extra costs that can be incurred in hiring foreign academics cannot be underestimated as some HEIs and governments may not be able to afford to meet these.

Additionally, the academic staff also require appropriate deployment, meaning that they have to be assigned to teach in areas of their competences. Deployment of academics to areas they are incompetent in and unfamiliar with may lead to failure to sustain and enhance quality particularly in their teaching and student learning, further exacerbating poor contributions to quality. Despite the crucial role that academics can play in enhancing quality in HE, having enough academics may be a huge challenge in countries that face crumbling economies that are usually characterised by poor working conditions. In such countries, it can be an insurmountable task to lure staff with relevant qualifications. Other academics may find moving into the diaspora where better working conditions exist irresistible. It is entirely understandable that, when academics become unhappy with working conditions, they may seek greener pastures leaving universities caught in the web of brain drain. Oftentimes, where academics are underpaid, they may seek supplementary part-time contracts so as to augment their salaries. Low levels of remuneration for the academe may push some of them into taking second jobs. This may make them less available to students and their institutions (Bloom & Rosovsky, 2007; Ashwin, 2006).

Enders (2007:16) notes that 'improving the working conditions (including remuneration) in the universities may help stem brain drain trends and possible frustrations. Enders (2007:14) asserts that 'salary levels and other issues related to remuneration have an impact on the academic profession'. In spite of the challenges, academics need to be paid wages that are commensurate with their qualifications and equal in value to their counterparts at least in the region or they may leave in droves. McGregor (2009) suggests that improved working conditions may

therefore curb brain drain. The status of the academic staff can also be upheld through creating conducive working conditions among other requirements. Therefore, improvement of the academics' working conditions should remain high on the priority list of universities and the state as this is one of the determinant factors for ensuring quality in HE. As the 'academic profession seems to have suffered a more rapid status loss than in the past' and 'the professoriate is seen as having lost its high rank in reputation among various professions, relative losses of income are reported' in many countries (Enders, 2001).

4.5.2 Quality of physical structures

Conducive infrastructures are a prerequisite for enhancement of quality in universities. In fact, infrastructure is one of the critical resources, which if missed, could paralyse the operations of universities. For instance, Duncanson, Volpe & Achilles (2009) observe that classrooms enhance organisation and opportunities for student learning and teaching. Classroom spaces have to be sufficient to avoid hitches such as congestion and classroom clashes. Students should not have to waste valuable teaching and learning time looking for vacant classrooms for lessons. As I noted in a previous study (Chidindi, 2012), in one university in Zimbabwe, lessons were held in crammed classrooms and academics' offices due to unavailability of adequate classroom space. That can compromise quality of the HE offered in an institution.

The growing demand for HE in most countries from elite to mass systems means there are other fundamental contingent measures that have to be in place. Larger lecturer–student ratios require that more and adequate classroom space is necessary, lest the few that may be available are congested as in Mauritania where HEIs are generally overcrowded (Bloom, Canning & Chan, 2005). Crowded classrooms may complicate interaction between students and teachers with quality likely to be diminished. Universities would have to ensure that they construct more classrooms to accommodate all the enrolled students. Renting some buildings or establishing additional campuses can be ideal options.

Not only is infrastructure availability itself a requirement for enhancing quality, but infrastructure maintenance and renovation cannot be underestimated either. Available infrastructure needs to be maintained for it to be conducive for quality HE. Buildings in dilapidating conditions may have negative impact. The World Bank (2000:25) noted that, in most developing countries, some universities are 'littered with deteriorating buildings'. Such buildings may be hazardous to users while dirty and dusty ones may equally be a cause for

concern to users' health. Infrastructure may also require installation of sufficient electricity and telecommunications since many of the global technologies rely on these to enable information sharing (World Bank, 2002). Unfortunately, in some HEIs electricity may at times be unavailable due to load shedding or total unavailability altogether. This may be detrimental to the enhancement of quality of HE as it may hinder the use of equipment such as computers and projectors. In countries with a myriad of economic challenges, construction or maintenance of physical infrastructures could be regarded as an unaffordable luxury when such countries usually face more urgent issues like food shortages.

4.5.3 Use of ICT in HE

It is indisputable that teaching and learning is central to the goals and purposes of a HEI. It therefore is imperative that HEIs have adequate sources of information as these can contribute to the quality of HE, or compromise it if it is unavailable/inadequate. HEIs need computers and well-stocked library facilities as these are crucial for the attainment and maintenance of quality (de Jager & Gbadamosi, 2010; Harvey & Green, 2006). Adequacy and quality of recent library holdings can assist in the attainment of the desired quality in a HEI. Both teachers and students need library books to consult for information on different concepts and subjects. In the absence of books in hard copy format in libraries, access to online libraries can play a complementary role. This brings up the need for access to ICT to enhance quality in the HEI. 'Information and communication technologies have the potential to facilitate communication among students, teachers, and researchers, and [to ease] their access to quality educational materials' (Bloom & Rosovsky, 2007:449). The new technologies that have certainly brought a new information revolution may also increase knowledge and understanding, while the best lecturers and lectures can be accessed on the web (Laurillard, 2000). Also, 'technology-based modes of teaching and learning are becoming the new norm for HE worldwide' (Ewell, 2010:174), hence such technologies may complement the traditional ways acquiring knowledge. To an extent, the web has therefore become an important source of information to enhance quality in the HE sector. Some challenges brought about by large lecturer–student ratios due to massification of HE can to some extent be tackled technologically although this is debatable. Gee (2004) says that technology can only assist in bridging the information divide if it is coming to people who have the requisite literacies. It implies that if a student battles to put together a first-year essay using lecture notes and a textbook, the internet will be of absolutely no use to him at all. Jenkins, Purushoma, Weigel, Clinton and Robison (2009:10) add that people need skills and interest in

technologies because they 'depend on peer-to-peer teaching with each participant constantly motivated to acquire new knowledge or refine their existing skills'. Thus, negating the significance of ICT impact on quality of HE may mean negating the existence of modern sources of information as well as new approaches to teaching and learning. It is an essential aspect of education (and therefore a quality indicator) but not a panacea for all the existing educational woes.

HEIs have to be adaptive to new circumstances. Not only is exposure to ICT crucial, but computers in universities ought to correlate with the numbers of students, academics and other staff members. However, a study in the SADC region showed that universities continued to experience constraints and gaps in their ICT infrastructure (McGregor, 2009). With high user–computer ratios in a HEI, access to the web may be difficult. This could impact negatively on access to information that could possibly in turn impact on quality of HE as academics and students fail to access the internet. A study in the SADC region showed that universities continued to experience constraints and gaps in their ICT infrastructure, with access-to-computer ratios in 2007 of 1:4 for lecturers and 1:70 for students (McGregor, 2009).

In spite of the benefits of ICT in enhancing quality of HE, there are challenges that may accompany the procurement and use of such information sources. The net benefits of technology may not be overstated but it comes with other inputs such as appropriate hardware and software through which universities may incur a lot of costs, including for maintenance. The World Bank (2000:25) revealed that there was a lot of scientific equipment that could not be used for want of supplies and parts. Although the use of technological and ICT advancement can complement or fill up the gap for material shortages, universities would need to be aware of the importance of continued funding to sustain this, yet some governments may not be too keen to ensure adequate budgetary support for economic and other reasons. The introduction and substance of ICT can be considered as another 'luxury' that governments may not sustain in the presence of challenges of merely adequate procurement of food for the nation. The World Bank (2000) noted that eighty percent of world countries' budgets are allocated to personnel and students' maintenance costs alone, leaving very little for material resources. ICT may also be viewed as capable of inciting radical notions in the population hence its development may be suppressed. In spite of that, technologies such as ICT have improved the ways in which knowledge can be produced, managed, disseminated, and accessed.

4.5.4 Quality of institutional governance

Who occupies critical organisational positions and their backgrounds is important as 'leaders make a difference in organizational performance' (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003:xi). Also, HEI managers have a crucial role to play in influencing quality of HE as they have to be more accountable to stakeholders through assuring academic standards (Barnett, 1992). This implies that institutional managers play a critical role in the improvement and maintenance of quality in universities and this is one of their preoccupations. To a large extent management influence the quality of HE offered as it is the management that define the values, vision and purpose the HEI stands for (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2005). For instance, from the fitness for/of purpose perspective, a HEI would need leadership that can direct the institution towards the achievement of its mission and purpose. Middlehurst (2001, in Gordon, 2002) says university management can ensure the success institutional success as they instigate, change and direct the institution towards the achievement of set goals. 'Leaders made a difference in organizational performance' (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003:xi).

Individuals such as vice-chancellors, pro-vice-chancellors and department chairpersons can be qualified academic leaders who are capable of being coordinators, coalition builders, and entrepreneurs (Askling and Stensaker, 2002). Effective academic leaders may have to be responsive to the difficulties and problems that lecturers face by attempting to remove impediments to effective lecturers' working (Ramsden, 1994). Individuals who can forge a system that evaluates and assesses itself for quality improvement and maintenance can make up the university management. The university management may require to facilitate self-evaluation to 'promote a sense of institutional responsibility by allowing teachers and administrators, with student inputs, to identify areas of strengths and weaknesses and propose corrective actions in the form of a plan for institutional self-improvement' (Steier, 2003:160). The management can be expected to establish the appropriate link between the administrative staff and the teaching staff. Unfortunately, noticeable among many universities is a failure to 'devolve responsibility for decision making to constituent departments' (Harvey & Newton, 2005). Some university managers decide to have all powers centralised in them while they become uncomfortable with any form of delegation. Instead, effective academic leaders can monitor the effects of their management strategies and strive to improve them (Ramsden, 1994).

University management can have all the necessary rudiments but can still be compromised where 'unnecessary' interference exists, be it the government or other players. It is imperative

that external meddling and day-to-day running of universities should be avoided at all costs. University management need to run their institutions in a professional manner in order to achieve their set goals. Right from the appointment of the university management, they can be above board and based on merit. In some countries management can be appointed based on political affiliations and under such circumstances some political parties may prefer people that embrace their political thinking to take up management positions of the universities even if that has repercussions on the quality of HE. The management need enough space to act and react accordingly as long as the ultimate goal is the enhancement and maintenance of quality in HE including the steering of the institution toward the achievement of set goals and objectives.

In a nutshell, university leadership can strive to have good strategic thinking, imagination and innovation (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2005). It is therefore incumbent upon an effective management that it should be able to foster cooperation of the university with the corporate world, other universities and the outside world to ensure the flow of the resources needed for the university to remain afloat.

4.5.5 Quality of financial resources

Institutional stability requires sound financial planning and support that are consistent with the goals of the institution. Factors that influence the quality may largely hinge on adequate financial support of universities. Traditionally universities have been seen within a province of the state that has responsibility for funding them (Forest & Altbach, 2006). This means universities rely on the state for their budgetary support usually through the line ministry of HE. Where shrinking economies and a decline in available public (taxpayer-based) revenue prevail, universities may get very little budgetary support (Johnstone, 2003). In fact, Bourgeault (2012) observed that there has been a marked reduction of government funds and HEIs 'face a dilemma to maintain high quality of HE with reduced funding' (Shah, Lewis & Fitzgerald, 2011:268).

Where economic challenges exist, the state and HEIs need to strive to find alternative means to devote more funding to HE to realise desired quality. In situations where the resources are scarce, undependable and unreliable, wider thinking is necessary. Pfeffer and Salancik (2003) give fundraising as an important option for non-profit making organisations such as universities, from private donations and other sources that may be available. Some alumni and philanthropist support may assist the university with funding and other required resources that

can enable the enhancement and maintenance of quality. University entrepreneurship can be another viable alternative too, with universities engaging themselves in income-generating activities such as agriculture and externally-funded research activities. Thus the university can devise methods of decreasing dependence on government funding by adopting the will to set up an entrepreneurial university. Fahlen et al. (2000, in Stensaker, 2007) suggest the creation and improvement of links between HE and industry, through which universities may tap the required material resources in the face of challenges in budgetary support. Thus there can be a creation of areas of interaction and partnerships between the business world and the university, e.g. research activities for the industry. Establishment of good links between the university and the outside environment through university–private partnerships for purposes of revenue creation can be vital.

In an effort to achieve a diversified funding base, another option available could be for universities to turn to tuition fees to augment dwindling financial resources. The tuition fees could be justified as 'those who benefit should at least share in the costs' (Johnstone, 2003:4), while costs of HE may have to be shared between the taxpayer and recipient through cost sharing (Eicher & Chevaillier, 2002). Thus tuition fees may potentially reduce resource constraints (Pillay, 2008:127). It is justifiable for students to pay tuition fees, particularly in countries where governments have become incapacitated to support universities financially, provided tuition fee levels remain affordable. However, in poorly-performing economies, stipulating payment of fees can be an easier thing to do for the university while payments by the students can be a challenging due to failure to be able to afford the charged amounts.

Where the GDP has steeply declined, tuition fees in HE may also lead to bottlenecks in enrolment where under-qualified but economically sound students end up enrolling on the basis of their ability to pay despite failure to meet enrolment standards. Charging tuition fees may bring up other challenges, such as drop-outs, with the drop-outs at times joining the unemployment bandwagon yet, on the other hand, HE may increase chances of employment and rate of return through higher wages after attaining university degrees (Branson, Leibbrandt & Zuze, 2009). An alternative to the possible challenges regarding fees in HEIs would be that universities charge low and affordable tuition fees while they widen the age cohort of their students to also target the adult group, thereby increasing the resource base by tapping the wider student population (Pfeffer and Salancik, 2003). At the same time the state has to take positive steps to ensure that HE is a priority sector and hence needs be adequately financed.

4.5.6 Quality of rapport

Quality assurance needs a lot of communication and a common understanding of the different stakeholders (Steinhardt, Schneijderberg, Götze, Baumann, & Krücken, 2016). This means that a quality agency as an organisation may not just wait to respond to stimuli but can continuously engage with other stakeholders within and outside the HE sector. The university may have to listen to stakeholders and other players to generate new perspectives for its activities and be able to strategise the way forward. In fact, the university can establish forums with various stakeholders so that an all-inclusive decision regarding quality can possibly be reached. Through such forums constructive criticism can enable the HE sector to charter the way forward in the maintenance or improvement of quality. It is necessary to borrow ideas and experiences of other HEIs and other organisations in the region and beyond when it is necessary to do so as lessons can be obtained on how (and how not to) quality assure HE.

As quality is relative, continuous engagement with other stakeholders can enable necessary readjustment in QA activities. Maximisation of opportunities can be obtained through listening to the different voices (Barnett, 2004). It is advisable that those responsible for QA not monopolise ideas and processes in QA as other players within and outside the HE sector can also provide vital input in ways of enhancing quality in the HE system. In fact, a QA agency requires an unstrained relationship with other stakeholders if any quality is to be earned while it can be lost if a relationship becomes embittered. I will be attentive to all these aspects of quality as I look at ZIMCHE as a phenomenon.

4.5.7 Quality of graduates

Employability of university graduates is a concern that reflects quality of HE (Harvey & Williams, 2010). The rate of employment of students after graduation can, to some extent, reflect the quality of HE (Prades & Rodriguez, 2009). It may also mean that, if prospective employers shun the graduates, this possibly sends the message that the state of HE may not be in sync with the employers' expectations.

Gibbs (2001) argues that it is not only the rate of employment that may reflect the quality of HE but also the skills that the graduates obtain from HE. Ramsden (1994) suggests that a quality HE is one that takes a deep approach, i.e. one that enables students to understand and relate evidence, ideas, and data. These arguments may mean that, as a way to show that graduates obtained quality HE, they may have to apply the knowledge gained to the real world, using their

knowledge to solve new problems, while they may also have to 'produce a large range of skills and abilities attractive to employers' (Smith & Brown, 1995:14). The challenge in this view comes in the blending of workplaces and HEIs, which may not be an easy task. It can be difficult to determine the level HEIs can develop in students (Tait & Godfrey, 1999). As discussed in other sections of this chapter, besides the employers HE has several stakeholders whose expectations may need to be fulfilled.

4.5.8 Quality research production

'In order to be a good university academic you have to be an active researcher as there are links between teaching and research' (Ramsden & Moses, 1992, in Brew & Boud, 19995:31). In fact, 'research increases teaching effectiveness' (Centra, 1983, in Brew & Boud, 1995:31). It is argued that staff's research records transform into their ability to teach effectively (Barnett, 1992). To some extent, research publications by academics may reflect the quality of staff recruited to carry out teaching and learning tasks. They can also teach from their research. In many disciplines, academics' researches are closely linked to the subjects they teach (Smith & Brown, 1995). This may imply that quality in teaching can be enhanced through research. Added to that, research by the HEI staff can also provide the cornerstone of any reputation of the institution, e.g. in the quality as *exceptional* perspective. Academics of high quality can also assist directing the HEI towards the achievement of its set goals, e.g. in a *fitness of purpose* perspective of quality.

Brew and Boud (1995) warn that there can be differences between perceptions and the actual practice as it is possible that some academics can concentrate on their research without necessarily translating that into teaching, thereby diminishing the correlation between research and teaching effectiveness. This means that, in some situations, some research may only be undertaken for the sake of fulfilling the annual research quotas of the academics, and this may therefore result in a devaluation of the quality that should be a prerequisite of the research. It is also possible that an academic can be an excellent researcher with high academic qualifications but still be a poor teacher. Thus there may not be any real correlation between undertaking research and being a quality academic.

4.5.9 Programme completion and drop-out rates

The quality of HE can also be reflected through the output of the graduates that a university produces (Prades & Rodriguez, 2009; Cave, Hanney & Kogan, 1991). Drop-out rate of students is also a numerical and qualitative standard that may give a picture of quality (or otherwise) in a university. The challenge with this assertion is that it is the students themselves, to some extent that can control the outcomes such as the graduation and drop-out rates (Prades & Rodriguez, 2009).

Students may drop out of university due to programmes and courses offered in the institution. In such instances, the university may have to make a flexible offer of programmes and courses so that students develop the zeal to pursue and complete the programmes and courses they enrol in. Therefore, HEIs may have to review programmes and courses when necessary. In a nutshell, an attractive curriculum and programmes for prospective students may be imperative in a HEI. Unfortunately, this may not be workable as it may mean a consideration of various individual needs of students, which may be overwhelming.

It may be beneficial to graduates that the qualifications obtained from one HEI are acceptable to other HEIs if the graduates wish to further their education. If graduates are attractive to other institutions, this may reflect a high regard of the quality of HE in their previous institution. At the same time, when graduates are shunned by other HEIs, that may also depict the sorry state of quality of HE in that institution.

4.6 Concluding remarks

This chapter focuses on the different discourses and debates about quality. An attempt has been made to show that quality in HEIs can be defined 'differently depending upon the criteria used' (Hazelkorn, 2000:14). Some of the perspectives on quality are fused into one another, although their proponents may see it differently. IQA and EQA as approaches to QA have also been examined, as well as the EQA best-practices schema. The discussion of the two approaches has shown that QA is concerned with power as a common feature. Both IQA and EQA attempt to assume control of the HE process. It has been shown that both approaches attempt to arrogate 'the power to require compliance with a system of monitoring, reviewing and accountability, notions that all are important in the quality debate' in HE (Vries, 1997:57).

As EQA lies at the centre of my study, it has been important to lay the groundwork in relation to its features regarding processes in QA before moving on to look at the role of ZIMCHE in QA. However, I first wish to describe the methodology I used in my research.

Chapter 5

Methodology

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter I describe the methodology that enabled me to identify mechanisms from which the QA processes emerged in HE in Zimbabwe. In this study, I adopted Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (CDA) as the means by which I undertook the research study. CDA provided a methodology, a way of collecting and analysing my data, but it is also a substantive theory, which provides a particular way of understanding the world through discourse. Fairclough's development of CDA tools, which are used in this study, are grounded in a critical realist (CR) view of the social world that can enable generalisations about the effect discourse is having on a phenomenon of interest (Banta, 2012). In this chapter, I begin with a discussion of CDA, and in particular with its central notion of discourses. Thereafter I discuss how I collected the study data and how I used CDA to analyse it. I end by deliberating the ethical considerations I had to engage with during the research process.

5.2 Fairclough's CDA as a research method

Fairclough's (1993:135) CDA as a methodology for this research study aims to:

> … systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power; and to explore how the opacity of these relationships between discourse and society is itself a factor securing power and hegemony.

Simply put with regards to this study, Fairclough's CDA aimed at connecting discourses, HE practices, and social structures; connections that were initially opaque but which this research study argues are key. This was imperative for, while texts contained discourses and practices in them, they reflected social contexts – the Zimbabwean context in the case of this research study. CDA was more than a methodology: I could see it as a disposition, a positioning in relation to knowledge, one which was committed to critical inquiry and therefore to challenging the implications of the operation of power (Fairclough, 2010). CDA sees discourse as

intertwined with social practice similar to the practice perspective (Fairclough, 2003). This allowed texts to be used as data in addition to considering the wider socio-political contexts, including institutional contexts of their production and national contexts of implementation. In this chapter I therefore describe CDA as a research methodology – how I approach particular texts as data, as well as participants as sources of texts. In my study, through Fairclough's CDA, I understood the discourses constructing the roles and processes of the ZIMCHE.

This was an organisational study, hence a concept to be addressed and central for CDA was *power*, which relates to the chance that 'an individual in a social relationship can achieve his or her own will even against the resistance of others' (Weber, 1980: 28). In situations when a QA body dictates the direction of the QA discourse in universities, that is the exercise of power. CDA 'often analyses the language use of those in power, who are responsible for the existence of inequalities' (Wodak & Meyer, 2009:9). Thus CDA researchers have interest in the way discourse (re)produces social domination, that is, the power abuse of one group over others, and how dominated groups may discursively resist such abuse (Billig, 2008).

Through CDA as a methodology, I was therefore committed to critical inquiry, and I therefore challenged the implications of the operation of power (Fairclough, 2010) in either universities or ZIMCHE. In this chapter I describe CDA as a research methodology – how I approached particular texts as data, as well as participants as sources of texts, up to the analytical stage of data.

5.3 Discourses

I explored the various understandings of discourses which could be used differently by different researchers in different research paradigms/ontological positions in Chapter 2; here I specify how discourse is used as a unit of analysis in my methodology. 'Discourse' can be defined as a 'cohesive ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations' (Epstein, 2008:2) that affords 'a way of speaking which gives meaning to experiences from a particular perspective' (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002:66–67). Discourses are therefore understood to have power. Although discourses have power, they are silent on how that power is exercised. The potential problem with discourses is therefore the emphasis on analysis of words more than actions. For example, while I acknowledge that QA is currently part of a more modern forms of governance that impact on the judicial and economic dimensions (Dill, 2010), this did not make part of the role of this thesis. Fairclough, Mulderrig and Wodak (2012) add that discourse as a representation

of social life, language or communication is used in relation to social practices. This makes CDA the study of 'language as a form of social practice' (Fairclough, 2001:18).

Drawing on Foucault's perception, Fairclough (1992:64) defines discourse as 'a practice not just of representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning'. With a similar conception, Locke (2004:4) defines discourse as 'a way of making sense of the world (or some aspect of it) as reflected in human sign systems (including verbal language)'. Discourse encompasses not only written and spoken language but also visual images (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). 'Discourse' therefore may imply 'ways of being and doing as well as ways of signifying' (Locke, 2004:7). Another view is that 'discourse means anything from a … policy, a political strategy, narratives in a restricted or broad sense of the term, text, talk, a speech, topic-related conversations, to language per se' (Wodak & Meyer, 2008:3).

From the above perspectives, 'discourse' is therefore a communicative event made up of language. However, for some researchers it goes beyond meaning captured in language to include meaning captured in a full range of representations such as pictures, sounds etc. Thus a related term which some researchers, such as Fairclough (2005:928), draw on is 'semiosis', which encompasses 'visual images and body language'. In concurrence, Gee (1996:viii) adds that 'discourse' is much more than language and includes 'ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing … by specific groups of people ... always a social and product of social histories'. Discourse from this perspective therefore represents an aspect of social life or practice (Fairclough, 2005).

Karlberg (2005:1) argues that 'the way we think and talk about a subject influences and reflects the ways we act in relation to that subject'. It follows that through discourse we can question our use of our rational thinking and our arguments or prevailing ideas. If 'discourse' is regarded as social order, as depicted by Fairclough, it is 'historically situated and therefore relative, socially constructed and changeable' (Locke, 2004:1). This allows 'discourses' to 'include representations of how things are and have been, as well as imaginaries – representations of how things might or could or should be' (Fairclough, 2003:207). This also gives discourse the 'principal means by which organization members create a coherent social reality that frames their sense of who they are' (Fairclough, 2005:918–919). CDA therefore sees discourse as a form of social practice in the sense that it helps to sustain and reproduce the social status quo while it contributes to social transformation. Thus discourses are:

> … systematically organised sets of statements which give expression to the meanings and values of an institution. Beyond that, they define, describe and delimit what it is possible to say and not possible to say (and by extension – what it is possible to do or not to do) with respect to the area of concern of that institution, whether marginally or centrally (Kress, 1989:7).

While there is general consensus amongst researchers that discourses are clumps of ideas that have power over what is possible to say and do (Kress, 1989), there is not general agreement between them as to the ontological status of discourses themselves. In the case of this CR study, discourses are understood to be mechanisms at the level of the real[29], in that they are intransitive (they exist whether or not the people who draw on them are aware of them) and they have causal powers in that they can affect what events and experiences emerge at the levels of the actual and the empirical.

Throughout this study of ZIMCHE's QA, it was important to establish how QA was contested through an analysis of the discourses that constructed roles and processes. Fairclough acknowledges that discourses are only part of the picture of how mechanisms lead to the emergence of events and experiences. I was cognisant that the mechanisms that I identified in the data might not be the only mechanisms that constructed the events and experiences (Banta, 2012) in QA in HE in Zimbabwe. Other CR theorists argue for a focus on other forms of mechanisms besides discourses. For example, Archer in her social realism claims that explanatory power and interplay exist between structures (what is said, or where and how) and agency (who said what to whom) and that this is where the lens of analysis should be placed (Archer, 1995). Alternatively, Maton (2007) calls for focus on knowledge-knower structures, in which he argues that there can be a struggle and possibly shift of power between societal groups or individuals due to their intellectual and educational claims. There are similarly other researchers calling for the use of other substantive theories and methodological approaches in CR studies.

5.4 The implications of discourses

The understanding of the term 'discourses' in socio-cultural practices implies that discourses have causal power in the social world (Kress, 1990) and function as mechanisms. According to Hansen (2006), social practice is the enactment of discourses. For instance, 'every social event

[29] 'The real' reality is made up of mechanisms which produce the events (Scott, 2010) and has the causal powers and tendencies to make changes in 'the actual' (Groff, 2012). More is discussed in Chapter 4.

or act involves some level of communication which can be analysed for the discourses that surround and give meaning to it', hence discourses can be one causal mechanism among a myriad possible others (Banta, 2012:380). In addition to that, an agency through a language has a rich set of causal powers to communicate, although these powers may not be used at all times (Fairclough et al, 2002). I therefore argue that indeed such causal powers may have some effects when activated in some contexts and cause change. Hence, communication can have causal effects on the transformation of organisations (Fairclough, 2005). Therefore discourses are mechanisms and CR understands events and experiences as emerging from the interplay of active mechanisms. While the identification of discourses through research constituted some understanding of mechanisms that were at play in the emergence of a particular phenomenon of QA in HE in Zimbabwe, the discourses potentially provided some important insights but did not constitute all the possible mechanisms. Through the use of discourse analysis, social phenomena can be critically investigated, challenged and not taken for granted. Therefore, in order to understand the mechanisms that were at play in the emergence of QA in HE in Zimbabwe, access to authorities was an imperative step of the research study.

5.5 Data collection

5.5.1 Gate-keeper's permission

Bryman (2004) encourages 'formally requesting permission' from gatekeepers to get access to the prospective participants and data (Bell, 2003). Before I embarked on data collection for this study, I applied for permission from the Secretary for the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education (see Doc 1) to access participants and relevant documents on the ZIMCHE QA in HE. This was a process that initially appeared to be simple but which proved otherwise. A response was promised to be available within a week, which did not happen. I finally obtained a letter of approval after one month with ten attempts of checking with the officials. I was also asked to move from one office to another. My patience paid off and I was told that the letter of approval (Doc 2) was ready for collection. However, it could not be located when I went to the HE ministry to collect it. I waited for three more days to obtain a new copy.

With the approval letter from the HE ministry I approached the acting Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of ZIMCHE (as the CEO was on sick leave). I briefed him of my research intentions and

he asked me to seek approval from ZIMCHE through an application to them. Within three days I obtained a letter of approval from ZIMCHE (see HE letter of permission).

5.5.2. Data collection process

Data collection in this research aimed at answering the research question and sub-questions. The method I used to collect data was the interview, which is one of the most important sources of case[30] study information and can yield exploratory, descriptive and explanatory data (Yin, 2014).

My initial plan was to have one-to-one interviews with all participants, at both ZIMCHE and university levels. However, I only managed to have two one-to-one interviews, as other participants at both ZIMCHE and university level preferred discussing QA issues together with their colleagues and thus they mainly opted for focus group interviews. Focus group interviews involved discussion of a specific topic with two or more participants who assembled for this specific purpose at the same time (Bryman, 2004; Gall et al., 2003). To facilitate the discussion an interview guide was used.

5.5.3 Interview guide

A semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions on QA in HE through ZIMCHE was used to elicit what all the participants in one-to-one interview and focus group discussions thought about of the QA discourse through ZIMCHE (see interview schedule for ZIMCHE staff members and interview guides in Appendices). I used personal experience and a consideration of issues in the literature to design the interview guide. The procedure gave participants an opportunity to express themselves in a more 'openly designed interview situation' (Flick, 2007:149) since the interview guide contained open-ended questions, and I rephrased and explained the questions whenever any of the participants did not understand. Interviews assisted me to understand why the participants felt and reacted the way they did (Bryman, 2004). At the same time I could pursue participants' responses in an effort to seek further details on QA in HE. Thus open-ended questions assisted in exercising some latitude to ask further questions in response to what were seen as significant replies (Bryman, 2004) thereby enabling deeper

[30] A case study is 'an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the case) in depth and within its real-life context' which includes both single- and multiple-case studies (Yin, 2014:16). In Chapter 4, I indicate that there have been QA bodies established in the HE sector and ZIMCHE is one case across the broader context of HE in Africa and in the international context of QA.

probing to obtain more information (Gall et al, 2003). The data collection process therefore became 'fairly conversational and situational' (Patton, 2002:288). I did not ask every question nor did I follow the order of the questions on the interview guide as in many instances answers to some questions were provided in the discussion before I even asked the questions. Due to the conversational nature of interviews, some respondents ended up giving additional and unanticipated information, relevant to the study, but which had not been considered while formulating the interview guide, for example the issue of access to HE by students with disabilities.

5.5.4 Focus group discussions and interview processes

Focus group discussions were a major strategy that was used to elicit information about QA assurance in HE through ZIMCHE. Focus group discussions are generally seen as an explicit use of interaction and communication between participants to generate data (Kitzinger, 1995). At ZIMCHE, all participants organised themselves for focus group discussions including the one participant who was involved in a one-to-one interview. All the focus group discussions and interviews were held at ZIMCHE in offices and at times of participants' choices without my involvement.

Regarding participants in universities, the same process of following participants' preferences in terms of venues and focus group discussion times was followed, with heads of QA units organising the focus group discussions. All fixtures were arranged by telephone.

All the participants signed written informed consent forms with information about the study before the commencement of discussions (see informed consent form in Appendices). From the start, in the focus group interviews, participants were encouraged to respect the different perspectives of other group members. Focus group interviews saved time and money as I travelled to an institution once but obtained detailed information from several participants within a short space of time. Each one-to-one interview took about an hour. In focus group interviews time management was very crucial as some participants took more time than what I had anticipated. However, discussions were left to take their course so that all the participants' feelings and perceptions could be obtained. Some focus group interviews took as much as two and a half hours. I allowed this as there were no possible encroachments into pending appointments since I scheduled only one interview per day.

In focus group discussions, participants also had the opportunity to attend and respond to each other regarding their QA discourses thereby giving themselves a chance to construct a common perspective in relation to QA in HE through ZIMCHE. Besides getting common opinions of the participants in focus groups, there were also disagreements among participants in a few instances. Focus group discussions were advantageous in the sense that more outspoken participants 'broke the ice' and brought forward aspects of the subject to be discussed (Kitzinger, 1995). For example, it was common for some outspoken participants to define 'quality' while other participants started an argument among themselves about ZIMCHE approaches to QA with regard to whether this constituted interference in university autonomy. Participants finally agreed that QA needed to be collegial (This is discussed more in the data analysis in Chapters 6 and 7). In another focus group discussion there was a heated argument on whether ZIMCHE used a collegial or policing approach to QA. In an attempt to handle the situation participants were encouraged to discuss issues further after the focus group interviews. It was possible to make follow ups with individuals after the focus group discussions for clarifications and/or about issues pertaining to personal points of view about QA in HE, while one participant later on volunteered with additional information after a focus group meeting.

5.5.5 Research participants

Two ZIMCHE middle managers agreed to participate in one-to-one interviews, while the other ZIMCHE participants were involved in focus group interviews. In total there were three focus group interviews at the three management levels, namely upper, middle and lower and composed of two, three and two participants respectively. The total number of participants in focus groups at ZIMCHE was seven.

The ZIMCHE upper management helped with the arrangement of focus groups at middle management level and encouraged other ZIMCHE officials to participate. However, there was one middle manager who actively arranged discussions at middle and lower management levels. When I went to ZIMCHE to make arrangements for the focus group meetings, on the same day the top management were ready for the focus group meeting. That gave me encouragement and hope of success on data collection at ZIMCHE. It seemed that the top management were aware of the importance and value of the research to QA in HE in Zimbabwe.

The upper managers linked me to participants at the middle management level while a middle manager coordinated the discussion at the lower management level and encouraged others to

participate in a kind of snowball sampling approach, which may reflect the hierarchical leadership style at ZIMCHE. It would have been difficult for as a researcher to just come in a more informal way and randomly speak to people. I therefore needed to be respectful of the hierarchy while I acknowledge that the hierarchical structure could potentially constrain the kind of data that I could obtain. Since the top leadership had encouraged subordinates to be participants, failure to participate could possibly send messages of insubordination, which raises certain ethical considerations regarding informed consent. One middle manager openly remarked: 'You are coming from my superiors whom you have also interviewed so how can I refuse to participate?' (Z2), bringing into question voluntary participation. (For purposes of anonymity, I gave participants pseudonyms below).

Z1 advised that I should interview QA directors in various QA units in universities to obtain their perspectives on QA in HE through ZIMCHE, which was aligned to my research plan. Two of ZIMCHE's middle management made contact and connected me with the various QA directorates with whom I subsequently had focus group interview discussions in universities. ZIMCHE thus not only supported the study but also facilitated the access process.

Selection of universities that participated in the study was primarily based on availability of QA units in the institutions. I also ensured that I included both publicly- and privately-owned institutions. This criterion regarding ownership was imperative as it had an impact in QA; for example privately-owned universities faced more serious challenges with regards to resources to meet ZIMCHE requirements (U1; U4). There was one focus per university. In total, eight focus groups were held in eight universities (3 privately- and 5 publicly-owned). In total 30 QA unit staff participated in the focus group interviews. All the selected universities had QA units and all the participants were involved in QA in the universities and were attached to the QA units. Excerpts from first, second and third university focus groups that were held were given pseudonyms U1, U2 and U3 and so forth while excerpts from first, second and third ZIMCHE focus groups were given pseudonyms Z1, Z2 and Z3 and so forth. The only one-to-one interview at ZIMCHE was given pseudonym ZI. Data quotes from documents that were used in the study were referred to as Doc 1, Doc 2, Doc 3 and so forth.

Obtaining data from participants in universities was also a form of data triangulation which enabled confirmation or corroboration of information from ZIMCHE. Robson (2002) proposes that data triangulation through the use of more than one source of information improves the quality of a study. Therefore the research did not rely on participants from ZIMCHE alone as

sources of data. QA directorates in universities also provided a rich and broad sense of their experiences of QA in HE through ZIMCHE. Such participants were equally crucial as sources of data as they played a crucial role in national and institutional QA while they were well versed in and worked closely with ZIMCHE. They were the links between universities and ZIMCHE in QA matters.

Again since I was linked by ZIMCHE to the universities, the issue of power relations comes into question. I was concerned about whether those in the QA units genuinely had the option to decline to participate after ZIMCHE encouraged them to do so. I therefore began each session with a fairly detailed discussion on the voluntary nature of their participation and assured them of their anonymity and of their right to withdraw from the study.

Despite the ZIMCHE introductions to QA units, it was difficult to access one university. Despite having obtained permission to collect data from both the HE ministry and ZIMCHE, a state university required me to submit an application to them to carry out the interviews with their QA directorate. I was then referred from one office to another before finally getting to the office to which I had to submit the application letter. I submitted the application but despite follow-up a response never came. In the end I decided not to include this institution in the study.

In the university institutions I accessed, QA unit directors opted that all individuals who were responsible for QA in units would participate in the focus group interviews. Only a single focus group interview was held in each of the eight universities that participated through the QA units with thirty participants in universities. The number of participants in all the focus group interviews ranged from two to eight participants. Thirty university academics who were also QA unit members participated in focus group discussions. The QA unit directors arranged the times and venues and organised participants, again possibly raising questions on voluntary participation in the focus groups as questions can still be raised about power vested in the QA directors at institutional levels. Again I attempted to ameliorate any perceived pressure to participate by stressing the voluntary nature of the participation and by assuring the participants of anonymity.

Holding interviews in selected QA units in universities and at ZIMCHE meant having two separate social contexts that buttressed the discursive construction of ZIMCHE's QA discourse. The separate social contexts allowed two different theoretical perspectives towards QA in HE through ZIMCHE to emerge in the data. The different institutional contexts from where

participants hailed provided considerable descriptions of the array of quality assurance and connections between universities and ZIMCHE.

The number of participants at both ZIMCHE and universities can be summarised in Table 5.1 below.

Organisation	Interviews and participants									Total interviews	Total participants
University	Focus group interview	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	**8**	
	Number of participants	2	2	6	8	2	4	3	3		**30**
ZIMCHE	Focus group interview	1	2	3						**3**	
	Number of participants	2	3	2							7
ZIMCHE	One to one interviews	1	1							**2**	
	Number of participants	1	1								**2**
Grand totals										**13**	**39**

Table 5.1: Number of interviews and participants in data collection

From the above table it can be seen that the study comprises thirteen interviews, of both one-to-one and focus group format, with a total of thirty-nine participants. This data was augmented with data in the form of documents.

5.5.6 Documents as sources of data

There was a three-stage data collection process, i.e. at ZIMCHE, in universities and finally in document analysis that I discuss in this section. Thus in summary the data collection procedure of my study took the following form as indicated in Table 5.2 below.

Data collection stage	Site	Participants	Data collection methods
1	ZIMCHE	ZIMCHE staff members	Focus group and individual interviews
2	Universities 1 to 8	QA directorates	Focus group interviews
3	Document analysis		

Table 5.2: Data collection procedure

Documents are valuable in corroborating and augmenting evidence from other data sources in case study research (Yin, 2014). The specific sub-question that was used to interrogate the documents collected was: 'How is QA constructed in the national policy and other pertinent documentation?' I therefore accessed documents associated with some significant answers to the research question, emphasising the meaning of 'construction' (Pujol & Montenegro, 1999). I examined any of the documents I accessed, mindful of the fact that there is no one accurate way in CDA of selecting and collecting data (Wodak, 2002). The documents were obtained from ZIMCHE and other documents were sourced, including from extensive internet searches' and other reports related to the ZIMCHE's QA processes. New communication technologies such as the internet allow 'more complex chaining and networking relations between different types of text' (Fairclough, 2003:31). Thus, use of internet as data, particularly the use of websites, enabled me obtain some documents that were unavailable in hard copy form, for example University Acts.

I had to obtain some of the documents as hard copies after advice to download them from official websites proved difficult. Most of them were not downloadable while some were unavailable despite links being provided. The following were documents that were obtained from ZIMCHE:

Author	Date	Document title	Reference name
Zimbabwe Government	2006	Zimbabwe National Council for Higher Education Act	ZIMCHE Act
Zimbabwe Government	1982	University of Zimbabwe Act	University of Zimbabwe Act
Zimbabwe Government	2002	Bindura University of Science Education Act	Bindura University of Science Education Act
ZIMCHE	n.d.	Audits instrument number 1- Institutional mandates	Doc 7
ZIMCHE	n.d.	Academic and Institutional audits instrument No. 2: Institutional information	Doc 8
ZIMCHE	n.d.	Audits instrument - guide new	Doc 9
ZIMCHE	n.d.	Accreditation criteria for programme accreditation	Doc 7
ZIMCHE	n.d.	Accreditation establishment of new programme	Doc 8
ZIMCHE	n.d.	Assessment instrument for assessing institutional compliance for accreditation	Doc 9
ZIMCHE	n.d.	Programme inputs assessment (Accr 2C)	Doc 10
ZIMCHE	n.d.	Criteria for accreditation of open and distance learning	Doc 11

Table 5.3: List of documents that were obtained from ZIMCHE

The documents listed above revealed particular policy trajectories and imaginaries that discursively constructed policy in QA through ZIMCHE. These included organisational policy documents, and institutional audit forms which also provided minute data that answered the research question. This was critical as CDA tends to deal with even small selections of material regarded as being typical of certain discourses (Meyer, 2002).

In summary Figure 5.4 below gives the methods of collecting data, sources of data and the sub-questions were answered.

Research question	Sub-questions	Data collection method	Source of data
What discourses construct ZIMCHE's role and quality assurance processes?	How is quality assurance constructed in the national policy and other pertinent documentation?	document analysis	documents (hard copy and websites)
	How has ZIMCHE implemented quality assurance as a series of events?	focus groups and individual interviews documents	ZIMCHE staff members QA directorates
	How has ZIMCHE experienced these events?	focus groups and individual interviews	ZIMCHE staff members
	How have universities experienced these events?	focus groups	QA directorates

Table 5.4: Procedures to achieve the CDA study and answering the research studies

5.5.7 Organising data

I employed detailed and close readings of the documents to examine the documents (Fairclough, 2003) to identify the discourses, genres and styles and the linguistic elements of the documents addressing the construction of nation policy. I identified key organisations, the authors and key stakeholders, or policy actors of documents that I accessed so as to ascertain the credibility of the documents. Analysis of the data obtained through focus group interviews explored discourses that constructed ZIMCHE role and QA processes.

A voice recorder was used to record all the interviews that were held. I also kept my impressions of the information and personal experiences in a separate file. The spoken discourse required to be transformed from sound recordings to text (Duranti, 2006). In a few cases I also translated participants' contributions made in Shona, an indigenous language that I am fluent in and is

spoken by the majority of people in Zimbabwe, to English texts. I selectively transcribed only the phenomena of talk and interaction that contributed to answering the sub-questions as 'a more useful transcript is a more selective one' (Ochs, 1979:44). I used denaturalised[31] transcription as it is suited CDA (Oliver, Serovich & Mason, 2005).

The data initially appeared as a mass of confusing and unrelated accounts. I therefore read and re-read through the obtained and transcribed data to prepare the ground for analysis, interrogating the data in the process. As I did so I noted how documents and interviews addressed specific questions.

5.6 Fairclough's CDA as an analytical tool

To investigate the mechanisms that constructed QA in HE through ZIMCHE needed a methodology and analytical tools that enabled identification of mechanisms at the deepest layers. There were multiple types of mechanisms (Fairclough, 2001) and it is difficult in an open system to select an analytical lens that could identify them all (Bhaskar, 1993). While each analytical approach would enable certain insights but entail other blind spots, Fairclough's CDA provided an understanding the world through discourse.

5.6.1 Data analysis

In case study research, data collection and data analysis occur as an interactive process where the researcher moves between literature and data and back to the literature again (Zucker, 2001). I considered Fairclough's three-dimensional framework for analysing discourse, namely: description (taking into consideration the descriptive dimension in which I related meaning of data in relation to the discourses that constructed ZIMCHE's QA); interpretation (at which I attempted to make meaning of the text with regards to the effects the discourses had as mechanisms); and explanation of texts (in which I explain the relationship between the interaction and the social context of the participants) (Fairclough, 1989). Figure 5.5 below depicts Fairclough's data analysis framework.

[31] Denaturalised transcription provides as much detail as possible but 'idiosyncratic elements of speech (e.g., stutters, pauses, nonverbal, involuntary vocalizations) are removed' (Oliver et al., 2005:1273).

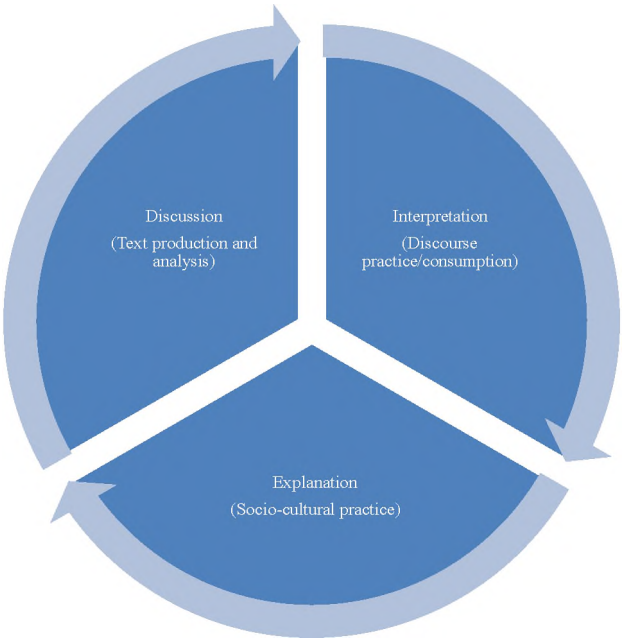

Figure 5.1: Three-dimensional framework for analysing discourse (adapted from Fairclough, 1989)

I focused my discussion on all three dimensions, although the typical objective of critical discourse analysts is just to describe and explain phenomena (Wickham & Kendall, 2007). Fairclough's (1989) analysis has gone beyond the 'whatness' of the text description towards the 'how' and 'whyness' of the text interpretation and explanation (Rahimi & Riasati, 2011). In this, Fairclough's realist stance aligned with my intentions in this research to move beyond a description of the empirical and actual and to identify causal mechanisms at the level of the real.

Discussion, explanation and interpretation are inter-related processes of analysis (Fairclough, 1989) as indicated in Figure 5.5. The process of analysis demanded that I shunted back and forth due to the interconnectivity of the descriptive, explanatory and interpretive demands of the data analysis. Therefore it didn't matter which stage I began with as an analytical entry to data analysis.

5.6.1.1 Description

Fairclough (1992) also refers to description as text analysis. This is the stage at which I identified and 'labelled' the linguistic features in the text (Kettle, 2005). I regarded this as the stage at which I identified the discourses that characterised QA through ZIMCHE. An example would be the 'discourse of fear' discussed in Chapter 6. In an attempt to unpack Fairclough's

dimension of description, I discussed the text (or *discourse*), which is defined above as written or spoken language, as well other systems of communication such as gestures.

Fairclough (1989, 1995) indicates that description involves textual analysis, which is an analysis of the form or organisation of texts, i.e. their 'texture', which itself involves a careful analysis of content and meaning (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). This became particularly pertinent to this study's focus on ZIMCHE's QA as it was contextually embedded. CDA provided a particular perspective on texts as data that went beyond the immediate text and included wider contexts of production and use. This brought into focus discourse as a social practice with discourse structures and ideologies that could be analysed. Therefore, as part of textual analysis, it was important to note that human beings are capable of being reflective about what they do in their practical social life through talking, describing, evaluating and theorising (Fairclough, 2003). It was therefore crucial to consider the wider social and cultural structures as I considered Fairclough's descriptive dimension.

Through descriptive analysis I noted written and spoken texts that represented particular views of the world and how they set out social relations. As I evaluated texts I discovered how they structured and stipulated social relations between ZIMCHE and universities. Thus, through CDA, I employed interdisciplinary techniques of text analysis to look at how texts constructed representations of the world, social identities, and social relationships (Luke, 2012). I also attempted to be objective, though Fairclough (2003:14–15) argues that 'there is no such thing as an "objective" analysis of a text, if by that we mean an analysis which simply describes what is "there" without being "biased" by subjectivity of the analyst'. This required that I include a strong degree of self-reflection in the analysis process and an adherence to the requirement of being able to point to the data to substantiate any claims I made.

As Fairclough (1992) takes discourse-as-text, the linguistic features and organisation of concrete instances of discourse were fundamental, therefore some level of linguistic analysis was crucial in this research study. Of concern were participants' choices and patterns in vocabulary, which included wording, grammar, and turn-taking in interaction, specifically in focus group discussions. This led me to intertextuality, which was pertinent to data analysis in this CDA research study.

Intertextuality is related to how a text was always related to some preceding or simultaneous discourse (Fairclough, 1992). Intertextuality therefore informed and underpinned the meaning(s) of any given piece of discourse (Fairclough, 2005). This is why in this study the

individual texts were not considered as discrete units but rather the identification of discourses across the texts. The ways in which texts and prior texts were connected was a concern since this is a CDA research study.

Intertextuality also included 'interdiscursivity' which was concerned with the way in which (types of) texts were different from one another and distinctive in how they drew on and combined together relatively stable and durable discourses, including 'genres' (e.g. a letter) and 'styles' (e.g. type of leadership) (Fairclough, 2005). It also showed how different discourses, genres and styles work together, potentially drawing from diverse orders of discourse. It also potentially showed the capacity of social agents to use existing social resources in innovative ways which, subject to certain conditions, could contribute to changing the character of and relations between social practices (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999), in this case QA in HE through ZIMCHE. The descriptive analysis therefore considered that the dialectic relation between language and social reality is realised through social events (texts), social practices (orders of discourse) and social structures (Fairclough, 2003) as depicted in Figure 6 below.

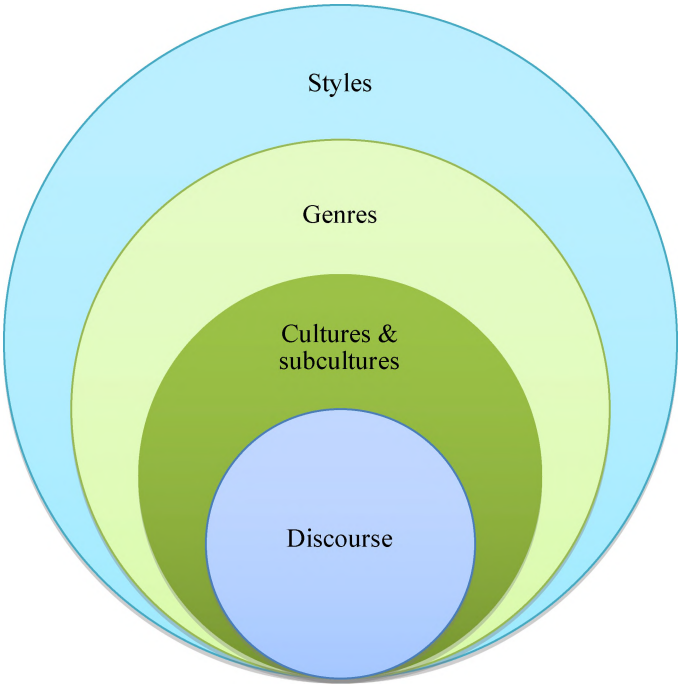

Figure 5.2: Textual context in CDA (adapted from Fairclough, 2003)

Through the available data I attempted to put ZIMCHE into perspective as text producers; how as a QA body they made use of orders of discourse to communicate with universities and other stakeholders regarding HE issues. Textual analysis is partly composed of inter-textual analysis, which 'mediates the connection between language and social context, and facilitates more

satisfactory bridging of the gap between texts and contexts' (Fairclough, 2010:189). This was therefore a concern on how participants made sense of their world of HE. It was imperative that I understood the ways in which participants as members of various cultures and subcultures made sense of who they were, and of how they fitted into the world of HE in which they worked.

CDA reminds researchers to consider the context of language use as crucial (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997) to understanding people. This brought up my interest in inter-textuality, which underpinned the meaning(s) of any given pieces of discourse (Fairclough, 2005) and so entailed that I looked at the bigger global, national and historical contexts in which some texts were produced. The process of attempting to unearth the relationships through inter-textual analysis led me to the interpretation phase which formed the second phase of analysis. From textual analysis on a text I was therefore able to make some educated guesses at some of the most likely interpretations that could be made of some texts.

5.6.1.2 Interpretation

The role of the critical discourse analyst in social interaction is 'to interpret the participants' meanings and understandings as they manifest in their linguistic choices in an interaction' (Kettle, 2005:5). Interpretation (alternatively, processing analysis) is one of Fairclough's (1992) three-stage approaches to analysis of discourse. Fairclough (1992) describes interpretation as the relationship between the text and the social processes of the interaction. In this study this was inter-textual analysis that emanated from an 'act of reading or analysis which makes meaning of a text' (Locke, 2004:8). In other words these were discursive processes/interactions and the text. For instance, such analysis helped to bring about an analysis of the ZIMCHE universities relationship in QA.

As this research was a CDA study I tried to avoid preconceived ideas in interpretation of QA in HE but rather attempted to be objective in more general terms to observe the fundamental dialectic between discourse and context (Flowerdew, 1999). Fairclough (1999) emphasises that discourse analysts should be reflexive about the relation between language and context or society. Due to that reflective need, it meant that it was crucial that I familiarised myself with the situation of the text as that enhanced my ability to interpret it. That also enhanced my ability to analyse the micro features of the text and gain insights into the situation in which it was produced. Thus I was then able to make sense of the actions, beliefs, and reasons in the ZIMCHE's approaches and processes to QA in HE.

5.6.1.3 Explanation

Explanation formed the third phase of analysis in my study. This was an attempt to explain the relationship between the discourse and the social and/or cultural context of the participants (Fairclough, 1989). This required me to re-describe the participants' linguistic choices in terms of their particular theoretical orientation towards issues of ideology and power relations (Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999) in QA in HE through ZIMCHE. As this was a CDA study, I analysed the language use of those in power, who were responsible for the existence of inequalities (Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

It was a crucial objective of my CDA research, to be explanatory. As I attempted to do so, that assisted me to interpret texts as determined by the social and institutional structures that contextualised their situation (Kettle, 2005). CDA, when applied within this CR ontological frame, has explanatory intentions and 'aims at explaining social processes and events in terms of causal powers' (Fairclough, 2005:926). Of particular interest to me was how participants' assumptions about culture, social relationships and social identities were manifested in texts and worked ideologically to either sustain, challenge or change power relations that existed (Fairclough 2001).

5.7 Ethical considerations

Participants were requested to complete and sign the informed consent forms (see Appendix 5) before they participated in focus groups. The issue of informed consent is closely related to voluntary participation (Cohen & Manion, 2011; Befring, 2004). Participants need to have all pertinent information before they agree and so the informed consent process entailed my explaining to the participants the purpose of the study while I gave them a chance to make their own informed choices whether to participate or not. As mentioned earlier, I was concerned about some people feeling obliged to participate after they had been encouraged to do so by ZIMCHE's upper management or their QA unit managers. I made a particular effort to stress that participation was of a voluntary nature and that I really did not mind if they elected not to take part in the focus group. Thus others voluntarily opted out of the discussions to attend to other activities such as lectures and telephone calls. In two instances I had to be patient for participants to take their calls. I actually found such disruptions in some ways reassuring as it suggested that people did indeed see participation as a voluntary.

As detailed in Appendix 5, I assured participants of confidentiality and anonymity regarding both their identity and institution that I would not divulge, but rather I would assign them pseudonyms. One participant remarked that the assurance was not enough since I was recording their voices (U8). To allay that fear of lack of anonymity and ensure that ethical promise, I assured them that I would hide every participant's name (which I never asked for) including their identifying characteristics.

Explanation was given to the participants that the use of the data was for research purposes only while they were assured of full disclosure of information regarding the findings of the research (Kvale, 1996). In some instances such a promise was disputed (U2; U4; U5; U7) as from their past experiences no researcher ever came back to them with the research findings. I plan to have feedback meetings at ZIMCHE and QA units in universities after the study at which we will discuss the research findings. I will also send an electronic version of the thesis to participants.

5.8 Drawing conclusions

Identification of discourses and reflection on their effects can enable organisations to examine themselves and obtain cues to possible solutions to prevailing challenges. I therefore attempted to present details of analysis of this study into explanations in a bid to have desired effects on their readers and to claim causal status for some sets of details in relation to others. This means that the objective of CDA in this study aimed not simply to describe and analyse discourse per se, but also to analyse relations between discourse and non-discoursal elements of ZIMCHE's QA, in order to reach a better understanding of complex relations in QA in HE in Zimbabwe. This then revealed how changes in discourse caused changes in other elements that constituted QA. At this explanatory level, I attempted to frame the text, that is, to show how the content of the text presented the sort of discourses that participants drew on in spoken texts (formal and informal), interviews and written text, and the effects these had (Reichenbach, 2000).

The final stage of analysis involved drawing conclusions and the presentation of the findings of this study. Firstly, drawing conclusions involved moving between the documents/interviews and their contexts. This gave a sense of the manner in which ZIMCHE worked to shape or shift its actual QA pathways. Secondly, there was movement between description and analysis. The research questions enabled the provision of particular descriptions of the mechanisms of the ZIMCHE QA processes. Thirdly, I moved between analysis and theory, where theory

illuminated the description and analysis. In short, the whole data collection process, analysis and presentation of the findings appeared as in Figure 5.7 below.

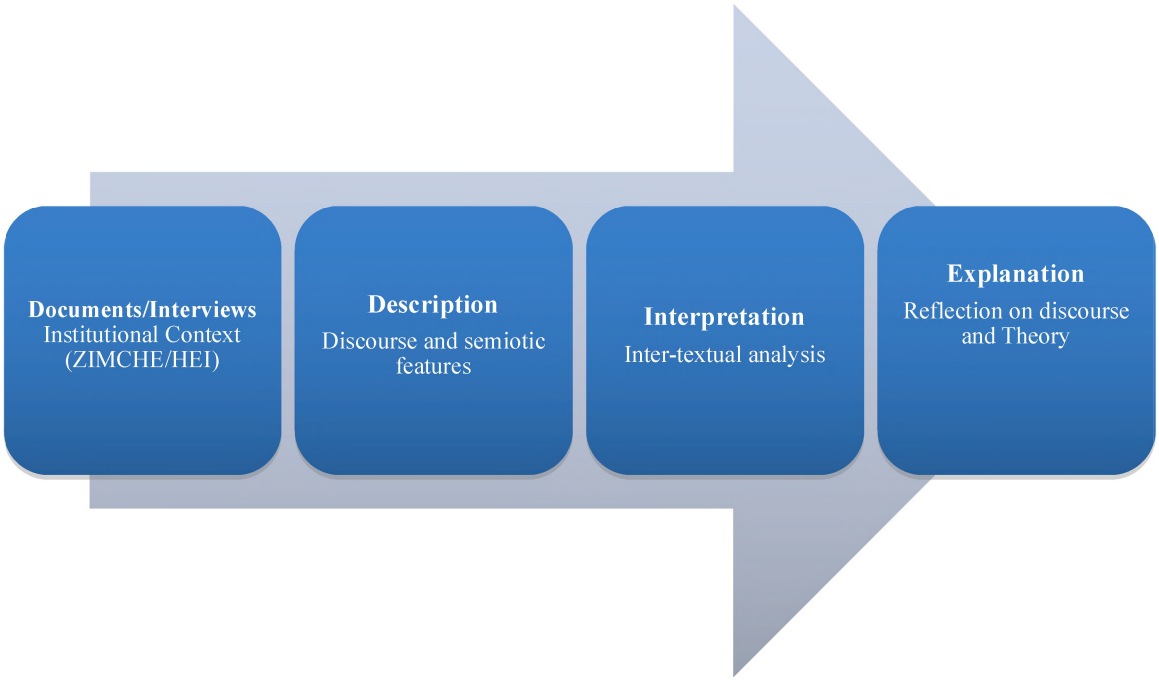

Figure 5.3 Data collection process, analysis and presentation

5.9 Conclusion

Having described my data collection and analysis processes, I now move on to findings and discussions of this thesis in Chapters 6, 7 and 8 in which I present the sets of discourses found in the data, namely a focus on discourses that constructed the conceptualisation of QA in HE, ZIMCHE–universities relationship in quality assurance in HE and those that relate to ZIMCHE policy.

Chapter 6

Conceptualisation of quality in higher education in Zimbabwe

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter participants' discourses of quality are presented, discussed and analysed. This is imperative as Bacchi (2000:50) notes that how issues get framed determines 'how the frames will affect what can be thought about and how this affects possibilities for action'. This implies that how the discourse of quality is conceptualised in quality assurance in higher education through ZIMCHE determines the quality assurance processes and activities. In an attempt to unravel the quality discourse, Harvey (2008) provides the lenses through which participants' discursive views on quality are looked at, cognisant of Fairclough's (2005) notion about the existences of various discourses as I presented and discussed in Chapter 4. I only discuss the discourses I obtained from the data, i.e. the participants' conceptualisation of quality. These are discourses of quality as standards, perfection or consistency, fitness for purpose, value for money and transformation. Harvey proposes these only as various discourses that people draw on to construct the notion of quality. Some overlap of some discursive constructions will be noticed while some positionings will be homogenising.

6.2 The 'quality' discourse in HE

In all interviews and focus groups, participants were asked about their understanding of the discourse of 'quality' in HE. As this was the first question, it gave most of the participants a torrid time attempting to express themselves regarding the discourse. I found that many participants simply responded by silence at first. The reaction proved Harvey's (2008) view correct – there tends to be a reluctance to define the concept of quality in higher education. However, the nature of discourses is always like this. People are not aware of the discourses that shape their beliefs and actions and so would not be able to articulate them directly. Such a response would have proved the idea that quality is something that can be taken for granted and that everyone knows it when they see it, although sometimes they may not be able to articulate it. Thus the silence did not imply that they could not articulate the discourse of quality as they later proved, which I discuss next.

6.2.1 The discourse of quality as standards

From the excerpts, standards is one of the various discourses of quality I found in my data. I discuss discourse of standards as there was a high frequency of referring to standards as participants attempted to unpack the discourse of quality as excellence, as depicted in Figure 6.1 below.

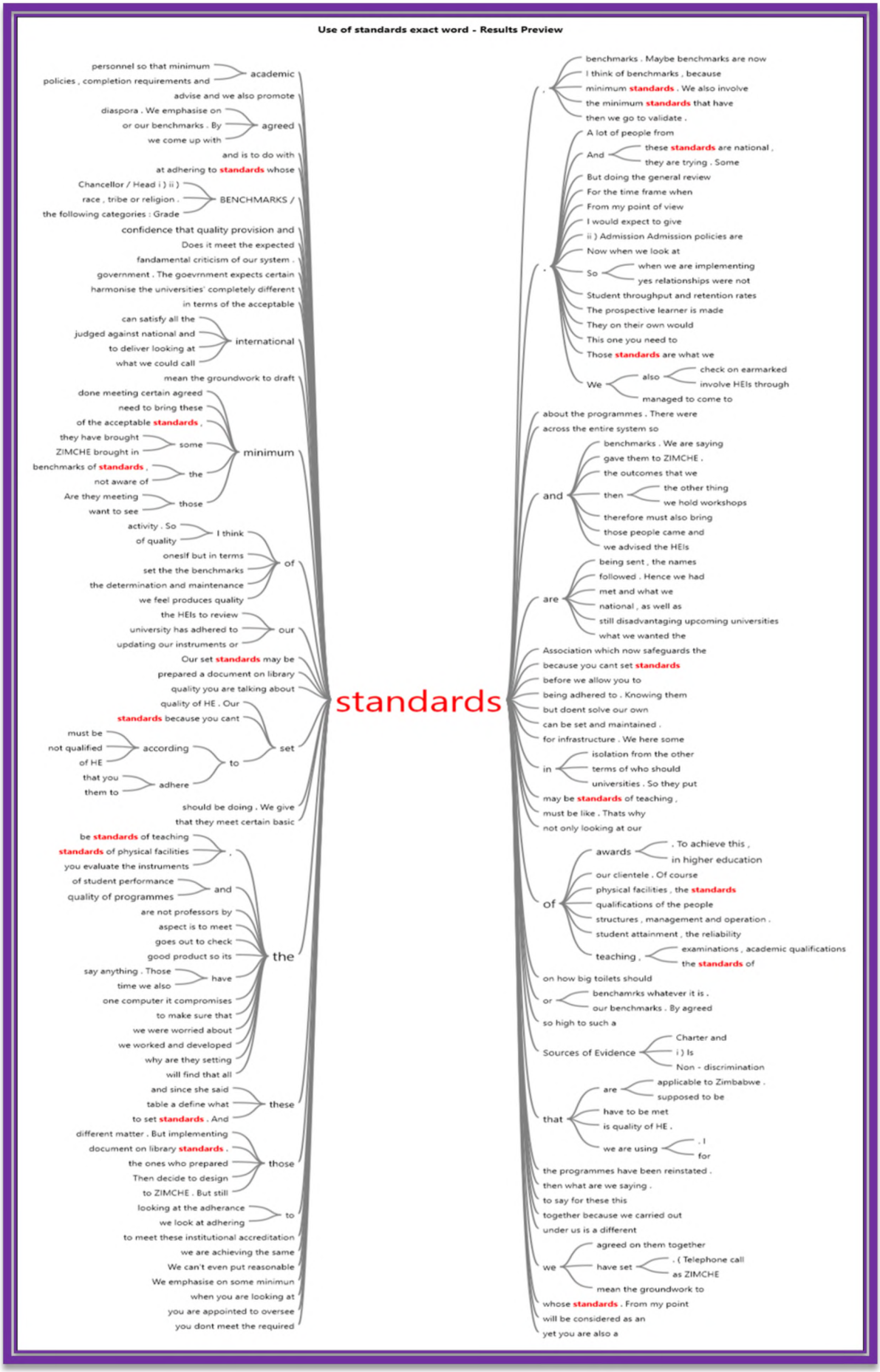

Fig. 6.1 Frequency in the use of 'standards' in interviews

The above visual image shows the frequency of reference to quality as 'standards'. I created the diagram using NVivo application, which is a qualitative data analysis software for researchers. As is shown in the diagram participants referred to 'standards' 18 times. Discourses are more than words so here this graphic gives a clear indication that the 'standards' discourse was indeed strong but this is just for where the actual word 'standards' was found in the data. Nonetheless, this visual image does portray how very strong this discourse was. Of course discourses are invoked in multiple ways – so the discourse of 'quality as standards' might be invoked in the data without even using the word 'standards'. However, a few examples in participants' reference to standards from Figure 6.1 above are as follows:

Quality is adhering to *standards*

Our set *standards* may be quality

Quality has to meet the expected *standards* of our clientele

Acceptable *standards* are crucial

Quality must be according to set *standards* and those standards are national

University has to adhere to our set *standards* for programmes to be of quality

Focus on 'standards' is one particular discourse of quality I found in the data. That discursive construction of quality was evident in some participants' comments. The following excerpts were examples.

> When I hear of quality I think of standards, because I am expecting that there is perhaps an agreed standard of performance for an activity that you are carrying out. If it is educational there will have to be standards that are set which you must strive to attain (Z1).
>
> All our activities in this university must conform to the standards set by ZIMCHE. When we do that then we are of quality (U4).

The above outlined discourse of standards all came from attempts by participants to define quality and put across how the participants used the discourse, in this case one in which quality is understood as standards. Reference to standards can also show the extent to which standards provide the guide to quality assurance in higher education in Zimbabwe. Barnett (1994) defines a standard as a measure or criterion (or a set of criteria) through which quality can be judged. It is evident that external quality assurance, ZIMCHE in the case of this study, influenced the

conceptualisation of quality as standards. ZIMCHE's expectations of universities came to mind. Also, for a HEI to be accredited it 'has to meet certain basic standards of structures failure which even its programmes won't be accredited' [sic] (Doc 8).

As I unpack participants' discourses of quality standards, I emphasise the realms of 'standards' as Harvey (2008) propounds and as participants expressed themselves. First, some participants used academic standards that Harvey (2006) describes as demonstrated ability to meet a specified level of academic attainment. The following excerpts support this discourse:

> We are saying a student comes into the institution so that at the end of the day he passes the exams that are offered (U1).
>
> I suppose students have followed certain curricula that gave them particular type of knowledge which enable them to prove through passing the exams that we give them. We then say there is quality in that education (U6).

The above sentiments mean that for some participants to regard higher education as quality, students have to demonstrate ability to meet a specified level of academic attainment, usually relating to objectives or stated outcomes, via performance on assessed pieces of work. Passing examinations is one of those expectations for observers to conclude that there is quality in a HEI. Usually, this is a measured competence of university students as they succeed in attaining specified (or implied) course aims and objectives, operationalised via performance on assessed pieces of work. Z4 said:

> A university graduate must be able to publish. Then we say our education is of quality. Look at it here in Zimbabwe there is very little published in journal yet we boast about being a country with the highest literacy rate in Africa. See if there is nothing published about ourselves then how do we improve. How do I base my instruments on? We are basing on information from external contributions. We have nothing specifically for Zimbabwe.

The issue of publishing means students are able to do those such things designated as appropriate at a given level of education. For research, this means the ability to undertake effective scholarship or produce new knowledge, which is assessed through peer recognition.

The second discursive construction of standards in the data is that of competence. Participant Z1 remarked:

> … if we want to construct a dam we must have specific university students that are most ideal to be involved. For example X University was established for that. If we talk of agrarian revolution students in the university comes in or contracted. Y University has a strong faculty of agriculture.

The above excerpts on standards of competence show a concern for students to demonstrate that a specified level of ability on a range of competencies has been achieved. To some participants that reflects quality of HE. As reflected in the way they used standards as quality, the competencies may include general transferable skills that may be expected by employers; a higher level of academic skills implicit or explicit in the attainment of degree status or in a post-graduation academic apprenticeship; or particular abilities congruent with induction into a profession.

The third type of standards found in the data is service standards. These are measures devised to assess identified elements of the service provided against specified benchmarks (Harvey, 2006). To regard HE as being of quality, ZIMCHE considers the benchmarks in its QA activities. The following excerpt from Z2 illustrates this point:

> For our lecturers we are saying are they qualified personnel to teach the students in this discipline. Are we using the right lecturer? For example are we not saying someone who studied mathematics now teaches agriculture? What kind of an output are we expecting form that?

Another example of such an excerpt came from Z3, who indicated that 'When we talk of quality in higher education we are looking at our learning environment, the staff, learning materials, our teachers, from the input processes'. The following participants added:

> … with regards to quality we look at the lecturers, the staff that they are teaching, the content that they are teaching the students. Is it relevant content to the student? (U7).
>
> For example when are accrediting a programme in a university we look at the curriculum, the quality of the students, the quality of the lecturers and facilities and resources. This is the way we understand quality (Z4).

Physical facilities were of concern as a measure of quality in a university. Z1 remarked:

> Quality in HE is the provision of services according to set standards that is quality of HE. Our set standards may be standards of physical facilities, the standards of qualifications of the people who are teaching and the content and depth which is being given to students.

In the instruments that ZIMCHE uses in accrediting universities, meeting certain standards was quite imperative. For example, in an instrument for accreditation ZIMCHE stresses that 'accreditation will confirm that they meet certain basic standards of structures, management …' while 'An institution that fails to meet these institutional accreditation standards will be

considered as an unaccredited institution …' (Doc 8). One of the purposes of ZIMCHE was 'the maintenance of standards' as contained in ZIMCHE's Audits Instrument No. 1 (Doc 9). In ZIMCHE's Academic and Institutional Audits Instrument No. 1 Institutional Mandates Introduction guide, 'Academic and institutional audits are meant to promote public confidence that … standards are being safeguarded and enhanced. Academic and institutional audits are, therefore, a process of guaranteeing the … standards' (Doc 9). All participants worked either with ZIMCHE or in the quality assurance units of universities. Reference to discourse of quality as standards was contained in such documents, which guided their operations. Such reference quotes from documents from ZIMCHE could have influenced their conception of quality as meeting set standards.

The above sentiments of discourse of quality as standards regarded a comprehensive set of elements that enable universities to realise quality considering required inputs. Thus, there was emphasis on a minimum threshold that must be met in order to reap positive effects in HE or achieve a certain status as and when they take accreditation. It is related to the discourse of being the best. Thus, to some participants, meeting some set specifications meant an achievement of quality of HE in the university. Qualified academic staff, physical facilities and curriculum content are all ingredients that enable the achievement of institutional objectives, according to its mandate. As is depicted in the excerpts, it appears the standard discourse was linked to expectations of the authority, i.e. ZIMCHE. At the same time set standards could have accurate and precise measures of quality (Lawrence, 2011). Such a stand is liable to controversy and ambiguity. The data discourse of quality as 'standard' reflects an ideal to which universities have to strive, or even an average. For example, in order to regard university management, which I discuss next, as having met the standards (see Doc 9) can be a subjective discourse of quality since this is not a physical standard that ZIMCHE, can quantify unlike the precise physical standards.

'Quality as standards' comprises various aspects, one of which is that standards relate to the quality of management. Institutional management as discourse of quality was very evident in the data. Some participants took the calibre of management QA and universities as a discourse of quality. The following excerpts are examples from a participant from a private university and a public university respectively:

> When we say we have quality we must have vice-chancellors that have good leadership abilities. We see some of the people who lead universities in this country are appointed on political lines (U3).

> I feel that the structure of the ZIMCHE must be right and the profiles of people who must fit had to be defined. Then somebody has to be deployed based on the merit with everything transparent. Yet we see that it was because of some people who wanted to come up with posts for some people. ZIMCHE was formed for specific friends and relatives (U2).

The excerpts above imply that to some participants, standards mean that there is a need for high quality leadership in the organisational structures as, to them, those who occupy critical institutional positions and their backgrounds are important (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). The implications of such excerpts from the data is a reflection of concern as to the way people are appointed to posts. Thus the appointment of the management of universities and the ZIMCHE have to be above board and based on merit (U2). The impact is that, when people are appointed to posts, the general feeling of subordinates is considered. Harvey (2000:7) suggests that those who are appointed to lead institutions must have 'interest and enthusiasm in taking forward higher education endeavour'. However, the fact that people can be appointed to positions of authority based on political inclination, as U3 expressed, may not be exclusive to Zimbabwe. Some people appointed to lead organisations primarily 'represent the views of the party not the direct concerns of the constituency' (Harvey, 2009:5). However, the impact is that university or quality body members appointed on political inclination may only play according to the tune of those who appointed them, to the detriment of quality services in the HE sector. The tendency of linking management to discourse of quality can have a tendency to include standards for the 'softer' aspects of management. This implies that leaders who can be manipulated by the subordinates can be regarded as having quality management skills.

The quality as standards discourse was often evidenced in the data through reference to specified benchmarks and tended to be articulated as quantified and measurable items. One manager of ZIMCHE put it thus:

> We also look at the input, the process and then the output. For example when are accrediting a programme in a university we look at the curriculum, the quality of the students, the quality of the lecturers and facilities and resources (Z1).

Implications: The participants understood the discourse of quality in terms of indicators that can be used for evaluation purposes. They also understood quality of higher education in terms of specific attention to input, context, process, and output framework. Thus, all the factors that influence the quality of higher education discussed in Chapter 4 are reflected upon where the discourse of quality is conceptualised in this manner. It implies that output indicators are seen

as the more direct outcomes of schooling, often measured by means of students in or out of universities, i.e. in terms of participation and graduation rates. This also reflects the understanding of quality in terms of the context, reflecting on the functioning of education. This understanding of quality in terms of context dimension adds considerably to the flexibility of applicability of the framework. In the case of this study ZIMCHE can exercise flexibility in terms of its standard requirements in its assurance of quality. It means this discursive construction of quality makes provision for considering environmental constraints. The economic constraints that Zimbabwe has faced over the years, discussed in Chapter 2, comes to mind. This is crucial, as through this discourse the context can be seen as a generator of required inputs, which determines or co-determines the definition of desired outcomes that should be generated and also the processes such as teaching and learning. In more practical terms, the context dimension gives room for situational adaptation to the local conditions. Thus this discourse of quality is context based.

The participants who took the discourse of quality from the context (input–context–process–output framework) perspective considered the state of the requirements that made HE possible. However, in the case of this study, if ZIMCHE were to use such determinants it could become problematic to measure the complex diversity of HEIs. Different universities have 'different missions and contexts, and the bias attached to the choice and weightings of indicators' (Hazelkorn, 2000:13). The American Society for Quality (2007) argues that such determinants of quality need to be measured in the form of a 'metric, specification, gauge, statement, category, segment, grouping, behaviour, event or physical product sample against which the outputs of a process are compared and declared acceptable or unacceptable'. This means their suitability as of some context indicators of quality becomes problematic. Controversy arises in relation to the standards that can be used to measure the value and to the individual who would define and set the standards. There is also diversity of mission in providers of higher education, so that implementing a common system to measure all HEIs potentially becomes a problem. It implies that the discourse of quality has a complexity of being a 'one size fits all' model of quality assurance of higher education.

On the calibre of the academics and students remarked upon above, Salancik (1979 in Pfeffer & Salancik 2003) asserts that the calibre of students that are enrolled in universities is imperative and crucial. The sentiments seem to imply that it is the university's responsibility to meet the students where they are at, even when students fail to meet the demands of the

study programmes at any university. To achieve this a university needs committed academics (Altbach, 2009), therefore the academic staff play a critical role in ensuring that there is quality in the university, which if missed, can endanger the ability to achieve in a university (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). This becomes difficult in the context of Zimbabwe as it has experienced an exodus of academics to other countries where there are better working conditions, as I discussed in Chapter 2.

Still on the discursive construction of quality as standards, work load of lecturers in terms of student–lecturer ratios was evident in the data, as Z4 observed: 'there was a situation at one university students complained that a lecturer taught a class of over three hundred students without even any microphone'. Z7 added that 'when I think of quality I think of whether a lecturer can manage to teach the number of students that are assigned to him or her'. Such discourse is prompted by an increased requirement to teach bloated classes, which is a common phenomenon in some universities, which at the end of the day may negatively affect the desired results, especially quality of teaching and learning. The discourse is also influenced by desire for reduced lecturer–student ratios, which is critical to building quality higher education as discussed in Chapter 4. So, to such participants, central to the discourse of quality is a reduction to student–lecturer ratios, as that constitutes quality in higher education. However, given the massification in higher education that Zimbabwe has experienced over the years, as discussed in Chapter 2, this discursive construction of higher education becomes unrealistic, given the contextual challenges. Beside enrolment pressures, reduction in student–lecturer ratios becomes a pipedream with the flight of academics for greener pastures (read more in Chapter 2). Therefore, while it is necessary that the workload for the academics is manageable, increased teaching of bloated classes is a common phenomenon not only in Zimbabwe: Materu (2007) observes that it is evident in most African universities. As a result, at the end of the day high student–lecturer ratios potentially affect the desired results in a negative manner, especially quality of higher education.

In the data there was also a construction of quality in terms of physical structures that were available in universities. It was a discourse that was closely related to that of the workload for the lecturers. In the data the state of buildings is specifically mentioned which, if not addressed, could paralyse the operations of universities. With regards to buildings, participants expressed their discursive construction of quality with regards to quality assurance in higher education saying:

> Some universities like the X University have resorted to renting scattered buildings, many of which are not even suitable to hold classes in them let alone able to fit the numbers of students in them (ZI).
>
> Surely how do you expect to offer quality where you do not have enough classroom like here where we are building and the money is not available? (U4)

Some participants valued classroom space as being vital for quality but its inadequacy in universities was observable. The impact of limited classroom space was that hitches such as congestion and classroom clashes were inevitable. ZIMCHE was also aware of this shortage as, in its Results Based Management System Strategic Plan for 2013 to 2015, it noted the lack of physical structures in universities for quality HE. Such discourse of quality could be influenced by the impact of classrooms on learning and teaching. The impact of infrastructural provisions cannot be underestimated, as discussed in Chapter 4. Furthermore, Duncanson, Volpe and Achilles (2009) postulate that classrooms enhance organisations and opportunities for student learning and teaching. Infrastructure has the 'potential to facilitate communication among students, teachers, and researchers (Bloom & Rosovsky, 2007:449). The challenges that participants observed in Zimbabwe were not unusual. The observation that Z1 expressed is not unique to Zimbabwe as, in most developing countries, some universities are 'littered with deteriorating buildings' (World Bank, 2000:25). However, in countries with a myriad of economic challenges such as Zimbabwe, as discussed in Chapter 2, construction or maintenance of infrastructures could be regarded as one the unaffordable luxuries when such countries usually face more urgent issues such as food shortages. Expecting 'excellent' infrastructural provisions where the country is economically crippled and philanthropists have withdrawn support (Shizha & Kariwo, 2010) is far-fetched. However, ZIMCHE is influenced by moving with international trends in quality assurance, which is an attempt to remain up-to-date. Thus Z1 remarked that 'for us to deliver we look at international standards not only looking at our own country'.

To wrap up this section on standards with reference to discourse of quality, the constructions show the conundrum that surrounds the discourse of quality. Participants used the word 'standards' in a variety of ways in their understanding of the discourse of quality, ranging from statements of narrowly-defined regulatory requirements to more generalised descriptions of good practice. It shows the complexity that this thesis had multiple discourses of quality in its research data. Such participants' 'standards' discourse was actually based on Harvey and Green's (2006) construction of quality as 'excellence'. They only showed that discourses are

clumps of words around sets of ideas. Such data was based on the notion that universities must have a high quality of infrastructure, academics, etc. that is unattainable. Harvey and Green (2006) suggest that monitoring bodies use the fulfilment of such minimum standards in their quality assurance activities. In a counterargument, Nash et al (2008) says use of such standards in quality assurance is ineffective as there are differences in HEIs and disciplines, each with their own unique circumstances and intentions. Thus Barnett (2004:64) attacks the idea of excellence as 'standing for no purpose, no ideal and no concept in particular'. Admittedly, distinctiveness and inaccessibility of elitist education for most people can itself signify 'quality', making it exceptionally dependent on individual notions. And yet ZIMCHE emphasised such excellence in its quality assurance, as is shown in Docs 7, 8 and 9. It implies that for ZIMCHE to use such standards it needed to provide universities with resources to improve the standards, such as infrastructures, and support that was unavailable due to economic challenges that affected the higher education sector.

6.2.2 The perfection or consistency discourse

Harvey and Green's (2006) discourse of quality as perfection or consistency was also expressed in a variety of words around sets of ideas. This means that participants who embraced this discourse may view quality as the idea of 'zero error', where quality exists as a discourse of flawless outcome (Harvey, 1995). A very interesting discourse was the understanding of a student as a 'product'. This discourse is evident in some excerpts like those that follow.

> We are saying a student comes into the institution so that at the end of the day he becomes a product that is used by commerce, industry, education, government through the public service. The level of quality assurance is such that we are saying this product is going to be able to perform in any of the designated sectors in which they have been trained (U2).
>
> By the concept of quality we are saying we must produce a product that is that is competitive locally, nationally, regionally and internationally. Because we are saying this product should be competitive, we are not only producing this product for Zimbabwe but for the region and the global market. So quality is essential, is critical because that product should be competitive (Z4).
>
> As universities we must produce products that are able to move our country forward in terms of manpower (Z5).

This was a fairly technicity-based idea of the university as a training ground for industry. Students are viewed as products of higher education, shaped and moulded for the benefit of

future employers. Thus Z2 remarked: 'as long as the product cannot fit well in the industry that quality is still subject to denunciation'. Z1 added:

> When we have educated an individual what is the destination of that individual. That destination defines what you view as the quality of HE. If you are training engineers for example does HE train an engineer who is able to go and fit like a square peg in the industry? [sic]

In agreement with linking students to employment, ZIMCHE stresses that institutional programmes have to address national manpower (Doc 9). All this links closely to the 'new growth theory' of the knowledge economy that there is a need for workers to acquire a range of skills and to continuously adapt these skills in the university (OECD, 1996). Thus some participants remarked:

> When we are educating an individual what is the destination of that individual. That destination defines what you view as the quality of HE. If you are training engineers for example does HE train an engineer who is able to go and fit like a square peg in square in the industry (Z3).

> What you find happening is that you find HE has been training engineers but who have to be retrained at the industries for them to fit for the purpose. So that creates a problem as we then question the kind of HE is this if it is not able train a cadre who can just go and fit in the destination (U6).

What the sentiments imply is that the university must produce implicitly students who are able to perform jobs after they graduate. Focus is not on student satisfaction but on student readiness for the labour market. Clearly Zimbabwe needs skilled labour for economic growth as much of it has since moved into the diaspora, as was discussed in Chapter 2. However, since the context is unattractive and unconducive for the qualified labourer, the effort most likely becomes a waste since the search for greener pastures remains unabated due to contextual challenges, as I discussed in Chapter 2.

The limited constructions of the role of the university can also be troubled. The student–product model is that they are like raw materials converted into finished products through a process of grading, and branding with credentials that confirm their satisfactory completion of degree requirements (Sirvanci, 1996), yet the role of the university is more than that. Higher education cannot aim at producing standardised, 'free of defects' graduates (Watty, 2003). And 'it is not the aim of the university to produce identical graduates' (Parri, 2006:107). The problem is that institutions of higher learning attempt to evaluate the end product. HE is more than that as the

whole student has to undergo a complete overhaul, as I discuss later, in the transformative dimension of quality through a continuous improvement of the whole student (discussed in Chapter 4). The underlying mechanism for such a discourse could be the culture in Zimbabwe that higher education is valued as a qualification for white-collar and professional occupations while it is increasingly important as an entry point to technically-skilled employment.

Reflecting quality in this sense of interrelated ideas of zero defects and getting things right the first time in higher education as in industry cannot apply in higher education. In practice, products do not make choices about how they will be shaped but students do. The mere suggestion that students are passive in their consumption of educational services would seem to discount the importance of their own educational identity and the broad repertoire of existing knowledge that they bring with them and build upon during the guided learning experience. The impact of this model in higher education in Zimbabwe, as Albanese (1999) notes, is that it allows students to be kept a fair distance away from curriculum planning and the assessment of learning outcomes even though they are important stakeholders in higher education. The excellence discourse is also criticised for seeking to create the perception that the academic sphere is equivalent to the ideology of the market, where value can be quantified, in the process ignoring the differences that exist among universities and making it impossible to look at individual institutions' performances or even engage into discussions with them (Nash et al, 2008). Thus U7 wondered 'why different universities were established' while he recommended that 'ZIMCHE needs to recognise the efficacy of each Act and institution on its own merit'. Therefore, instead of an external QA body coming in to strengthen the institutional mechanisms to achieve the set specifications, an ideal situation for conflict may be created. Instead Reichert (2008) suggests that quality assurance agencies support universities' innovative initiatives to achieve their set objectives.

6.2.3 Discourse of quality as fitness of purpose

There was evidence of the discursive construction of quality as fitness of purpose in the data, a discourse that is discussed in detail in Chapter 4. When I asked how quality was conceptualised, the following excerpts were obtained:

> The best way to look at quality is simply to say what its purpose is. What do you want to achieve and is what you are giving worth what you want to achieve. That's quality. If I may want to use an example of what one philosopher said, that is Socrates. He says the quality of the knife is in its capacity to fulfil the

> mandate of cutting well. If it can cut well then it is a knife of quality. If it looks beautiful but can't cut well that means it's not a knife of quality. So we can say it's the end that justifies the means. So that's quality (Z3).
>
> But picking it up from the concept of stakeholders we are saying quality is taken from the point of view that education is supposed to have fitness of purpose. Because when we deliver quality education we must make sure that the education that we are providing is fit for purpose in the sense that it's meeting stakeholder expectations like the industry, employers and so forth (U8).

U4 added that 'for us at our university it has been all the systems, for us as an institution we make sure that we are fit for purpose' while U6 said 'quality is anything that can fit for its intended purpose'.

The discursive construction of quality as fitness of purpose as outlined above shows participants emphasising the institutional purposes. Thus such a discourse took into consideration the 'diversity of institutions … having different missions and subject focuses ...' (Harvey, 2002:14). It shows that participants were aware of the institutions' purposes of their establishments. From a realist point of view such a discourse could be caused by awareness of the Acts or Charters that guided universities' operations, as I discussed in Chapter 2. These were documents that were readily available and may possibly be the underlying influence of the discourse. Furthermore, participants emphasised the institutions fulfilling their clearly stated missions (or their purposes) while they have to be efficient and effective in meeting the goals, which they have set for themselves (Harvey & Green, 1993). Such a discursive posture also took into account that universities have to fulfil not only their missions per se but also the national, governmental, disciplinary, professional, or other threshold expectations. Harvey (2008) argues that a university cannot solely be judged by its mission objectives alone. The discursive positions may also mean that universities have to have the adequate resources they need to meet the stated purposes.

The implication of fitness of purpose construction of quality can also mean that universities had the potential 'to evaluate whether the quality assurance system that a university has is successfully achieving its aims and objectives' (Harvey & Green, 1993:20). In addition to that, such a discursive construction of quality can enable institutions to identify their own mission against how well they fulfil self-imposed intentions' (Harvey, 2009:6).

The same 'fitness for purpose' construction of quality potentially allowed for an evaluation that could lead to discussion, compromise and challenge of the comprehensiveness and relevance of purpose in order to ensure improvements. This discursive construction of quality assumes

that universities have a strong sense of purpose and clear strategic plans, although some universities may 'tend to have goals that are rather unclear and sometimes contradictory, with poorly understood systems to achieve them' (Hearn, 1996, in Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2005:75).

6.2.4 The discourse of value for money

There was a multiplicity of constructions of quality, which is the nature of discourses. The discourse of value for money is another one that I found in the data. Some participants expressed that quality was value for money. The following excerpts were evident in the data.

> We are saying if students are paying so much they are supposed to get the value of their money. The fees must be commensurate with the services they are getting. You find some are paying up to 1000 dollars but the lecturers do not come (Z4).
>
> Students are entitled for value for their money in terms of whatever they pay for they must get that service. They must not be short-changed (U7).
>
> … so when we say quality of higher education ... as a university we are saying do stakeholders get value for their money (U1).

The discourse expressed in the excerpts potentially expresses an expectation that universities be held to account. This means the notion of accountability is central to this discourse. Thus Z5 said:

> Universities are public institutions which use public funds so there is this issue of accountability and transparency. There is no way you can use public funds willy nilly doing whatever you would like to do with public funds. Also remember in these universities at times there is abuse of funds, abuse of resources so there is need for some checks and balances in the system.

The excerpts imply that to some participants institutions had to be publicly accountable. They implied that universities are expected to be accountable to the funders, such as the students, governments and philanthropists. Harvey (2009) stresses the need to account for and prioritise public expenditure, and hence the pressure to ensure value for both private and public monies. The modern interest in accountability is related to New Public Management concepts and has mainly been a phenomenon seen as replacing 'trust' and as part of new governance arrangements stimulating increased institutional autonomy. As a means to augment the university finances owing to the dwindling national fiscus and the fading donors, tuition fees

have become options (Kotecha & Perold, 2013). 'Those who benefit should at least share in the costs', hence one of the justifications for introducing tuition fees (Johnstone, 2003:4). In Zimbabwe charging of fees at universities was adopted as policy in 2001 (Shizha & Kariwo, 2011) with IMF calling upon the Zimbabwe government to 'relieve the burden on public sources of financing higher education by increasing the participation of beneficiaries and their families' (World Bank, 1988:77). Resultantly, student fees contribute 12.4% of universities' financial needs (Kotecha, 2010). That could be one of the major justifications for stakeholders such as students to concern themselves so much with the accounting of their money.

The above developments in HE in Zimbabwe may have influenced participants to adopt the discursive construction of quality as value for money. It is interesting to note that, in the Zimbabwean HE context, there have been incidents of student uprisings that have disrupted university business over the tuition and other charges that students pay. However, with the prevailing circumstance where students are paying tuition fees, there has been an increase in students' voices regarding how their tuition is used in the universities. For instance, *NewsDay* (2015) reported about student protests at the University of Zimbabwe, Great Zimbabwe University and Midlands State University regarding poor food that was not commensurate with what they paid and also loss of lectures due to a lecturers' strike. Thus, increasingly, fee-paying students are also considering their own investment in higher education in value for money terms and this may have influenced participants' discourse of quality in this study.

ZIMCHE also notes that there is very little funding for HE currently while universities mainly rely on tuition fees. It may therefore be inevitable that the way tuition fees are spent can easily become a cause for concern. Such a prevailing circumstance may have influenced the value for money discourse of quality as students become the crucial and central stakeholders to the operational effectiveness of the university. As the context of this research study was that it was characterised by economic challenges, the need for universities to meet the demands placed on them by the stakeholders such as students may have influenced the discursive construction of quality of the participants.

The discourse of quality as value for money has its own challenges for universities. The discourse of value for money as shown above can convey the message that such value needs to be measured in the form of a 'metric, specification, gauge, statement, category, segment, grouping, behaviour, event or physical product sample against which the outputs of a process are compared and declared acceptable or unacceptable' (American Society for Quality, 2007).

Such crude economic calculations may controversial. Controversy can arise in relation to the standards that can be used to measure the value and to the individual who would define and set the standards as HE is perceived through economic lenses. Whereas universities must be concerned with knowledge not skills, and intellectual capital not economic capital, seeing the university as a financial investment in employability skills undermines the authority and value of knowledge. University students may see themselves as investors in receipt of university service, and seek, as investors, value for money and a good return from their investment during the post-graduate period and earnings if any. However, the new knowledge students attain during study is more crucial, hence the value for money discursive construction of quality underestimates the value and purpose of universities. HE cannot be fixated on putting a price on everything despite having injected money into it through fees and other ways. This takes me to the transformative discourse of quality, which I address next.

6.2.5 The transformation discourse

The construction of quality as transformation was evident in the data. This discourse sees quality as a process of qualitative change, which in HE adds value to students through their learning (Harvey, 1999). Some participants took this discursive posture regarding their understanding of quality of HE. There are notable excerpts regarding that discourse. The following are examples:

> We are saying when the student is in university is he or she able to have time for himself or herself to study alone, to be free and experience social life or to engage in sport on his own initiative. These necessary issues to transform the whole student (U4).

> With quality we say are we producing a student who is going to be a social being. Are we producing someone whom society is going to look up to even for advice as an educated individual? (Z5).

Through this discourse, it seems participants in this study perceived quality as a process of qualitative change with emphasis on adding value to students and empowering them (Harvey & Knight, 1996). To such participants education in the university is not just an academic achievement but is 'about the enhancement and empowerment of students as participants in process of learning' and 'even more than that, higher education is about participation in a process of learning for transformation' (Harvey, 1996:2). The students are the central stakeholders as their experiences in the university are crucial in their own transformation and

their capability to transform society. To such participants, the learning experience for students in universities is a momentous historical juncture. Thus, quality, in this respect, regards changes that take place arguably through the student experience.

Other skills, therefore, outside the academic ones were part of quality of HE to such participants. They saw the purpose of universities as including 'to develop the talents of its students to their maximum potential' (Dill & Beerkens, 2010). Thus they saw quality HE as an ongoing process of transformation of the participant. It means that, where there is quality HE, the transformative process must enhance a process of change, which in higher education adds value to students through their learning experience. What this means is that participants had two notions of transformative quality in education: enhancing and empowering the student, agreeing with Harvey (1996:2) and Harvey & Knight (1996).

Quality as transformation sees quality as a process of qualitative change, which in HE adds value to students through their learning (Harvey, 1999). Thus the focus is mainly on the knowledge and skill acquisition that students achieve, which in itself is hard to define. This raises the issue of the set of competences which graduates ought to possess at a certain level, irrespective of the subject(s) which they have studied (Elton, 1998). Thus again if specifications are emphasised HE can lose focus of moulding the whole student, as I argue in other sections of this chapter.

6.3 Conclusion

This chapter focuses on the discursive construction of quality in higher education in Zimbabwe. I have looked at the data from Harvey's (1995) perceptions of quality of higher education of exceptional, perfection or consistency, fitness for purpose, and value for money. The chapter shows the availability of a multiplicity of discourses of quality that prevailed among the university and ZIMCHE participants. In doing so, the chapter has demonstrated that, although Harvey's (1995) perceptions dominate the discourse of quality in universities and the ZIMCHE, the standards discourse of quality, which was discussed as only an input measure, dominated. It is clear in this chapter that participants had numerous constructions of quality, which also included many components. This chapter shows that quality is a generic discourse in higher education which lends itself to many interpretations. The various constructions of quality potentially impacted on relationships among stakeholders in higher education and policy, as I discuss next.

Chapter 7

Discourses related to ZIMCHE and universities relationship

7.1 Introduction

Discourses in QA are replete with power tensions (Luckett, 2006). This chapter looks at the discourses that construct the relationship between ZIMCHE and the universities in Zimbabwe. It identifies five key discourses at play in the data from both ZIMCHE and the universities: *autonomy*, *sustenance*, *fear*, *contempt*, and *confidence*. These discourses are discussed discretely in order to best make sense of how they were evidenced in the data, but of course they did not function in isolation from one other. These discourses overlap, sustain and at times contradict each other. Fairclough (1993) has argued that the identification of separate discourses by the researcher is a process for analytical clarity.

Through the presentation of these discourses as they emerged from the data, this chapter begins to answer the research questions: How has ZIMCHE implemented quality assurance as a series of events? How has ZIMCHE experienced these events? And, How have universities experienced these events? This chapter therefore focuses on the qualitative analysis of the relationship between universities and ZIMCHE throughout the iterative QA processes and activities. This analysis of ZIMCHE–universities relationship aims at revealing the degree of influence and the role of power that affected the processes and outcome of QA in HE in Zimbabwe.

7.2 Discourse of autonomy

While ZIMCHE was empowered by the ZIMCHE Act, there seemed to be a power struggle with universities, which were also guided by their own university Acts or Charters. The power struggle between universities and ZIMCHE could potentially emanate from ZIMCHE's attempt to control quality in universities while different legislations which guided institutional operations were in place, i.e. the ZIMCHE Act and university Acts or Charters for ZIMCHE and universities respectively. The legislative atmosphere presented an appropriate space for power struggle between ZIMCHE and universities, as universities regularly cited their own Acts or Charters in issues that were related to QA.

To cite an example of conflict within a bigger issue, Chapter 25:13 of the National University of Science of Technology (NUST) empowered the university to confer degrees upon persons who had followed courses of study approved by the university through the Senate and additionally, or alternatively, had satisfied such other requirements as could be determined by the institution. Also, while Acts or Charters provided guidance in the establishment of academic programmes in universities, universities were able to provide courses leading to degrees and confer degrees as approved by the Senate (National University of Science and Technology Act, 1997; University of Zimbabwe Act Chapter 25:26, 1982). At the same time ZIMCHE was empowered to act as a regulator in the determination and maintenance of standards of HE, in order to control and regulate academic qualifications in universities (Zimbabwe Governent, 2006). The consequence was a possible power struggle between ZIMCHE and universities as they attempted to implement the terms of their legislative discourses. To this effect U2 said: 'We are guided by our own Act and we need to determine the degrees we award'. While I have here indicated the power struggle as it emerged in the document data in the form of conflicts between the authority provided by the ZIMCHE Act and that provided by individual university Charters and Acts, the issue of power struggle permeated the interview data too. The discourses that follow draw on such data and are closely entwined with the idea of a power struggle in sometimes subtle and at other times overt ways.

This perceived power struggle between ZIMCHE and the universities was part of a strong discourse of autonomy in the data which indicated a sense that ZIMCHE's QA processes impinged on academic freedom and institutional autonomy, two issues that are complex, and often misunderstood. These terms overlap and are often confusing and thus in need of some clarification. The two were intertwined in the data hence I address both of them in this discussion before looking at how they emerged in the data.

Academic freedom entails allowing academic enquiry in pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, without fear of dismissal or a need to conform to government contracts (Conrad, 2002). There must therefore be an emphasis on freedom to search for truth and its free exposition without censorship. Faculty members should therefore not be constrained by any form of external interference to tailor their findings or their teachings to please or accommodate interest groups or persons (Tierney & Corwin, 2007). Academic freedom is guided by the philosophy that institutions 'require strong academics that have the relative autonomy to focus on their work, with an enabling environment in which to do so' (CHE, 2013:67). With regards to QA in HE, one of the major issues is what degree of independence academics should have:

> ... from ministers and from major ministries and departments ... the major arguments for a high degree of independence are that such independence will lead to greater trust and confidence, and enhance professional judgements (Harman, 1998:350).

Institutional autonomy, on the other hand, refers to self-government by the university (Taiwo, 2011). Institutional autonomy therefore implies the freedom for a HEI to run its own affairs without the direct control or influence of the government or any outside actors. However, self-governance has no guarantee for academic freedom as dominant academics can subdue other academics in the university (du Toit, 2007). This implies that self-governance arrangements can still hamper progress in the university if not rigorously and critically constructed.

In the Zimbabwean HE context, the ZIMCHE establishment came to universities that had held considerable autonomy and were governed by University Councils appointed in terms of their Acts (for public universities) and Charters (for private universities) (Shizha & Kariwo, 2011). Shizha and Kariwo note that, before the establishment of ZIMCHE, University Councils had executive authority on policymaking and the daily running of the universities through the vice-chancellor and institutional management team (Doc 9). In assistance was also the University Senate, made up of academic staff and chaired by the vice-chancellor, with oversight on academic policies and their operations. Both the Council and Senate had a plethora of committees and sub-committees with university members of staff and students represented within them. It is against this background that some participants (Z1; U3; U1) experienced ZIMCHE as tampering with the autonomous status quo that existed in the HE sector. It was evident among such participants that the introduction of ZIMCHE was felt to bring losses of both academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

ZIMCHE was empowered by an Act of Parliament, Chapter 25:27, promulgated in 2006, to promote and co-ordinate HE and to act as a regulator in the determination and maintenance of quality. ZIMCHE 'as part of their concern, and within their sphere of competence, is to evaluate the quality in universities' (Turner, 2011:2). The line between evaluation of quality and impingement on academic freedom and institutional autonomy was not always clear to the participants in this study. 'We asked what ZIMCHE is. Who is this telling us to do things the way they want? What is ZIMCHE we asked?' (U1). Participant U4 explained further:

> Universities had been used to operating alone with academic freedom, independently so to speak and no one has been watching them. They were watching themselves. In other words, they had what we call internal quality

> assurance mechanisms. So universities were watching themselves. Now imagine someone who has been watching themselves and inviting foreign experts at their own liberty and no one enforcing anything on them. You see, you don't want to lose that kind of sovereignty easily.

So, before ZIMCHE, there was extensive autonomy and institutions undertook internal QA as they saw fit. There was a decentralised administrative system for QA in universities in Zimbabwe, with each university using its own methods. This is the 'autonomous' context in Zimbabwe's HEI system into which ZIMCHE was established as an external QA regulatory body (Act for the Council of Higher Education, 2006). Some participants expressed that ZIMCHE threatened their autonomy as Figure below shows.

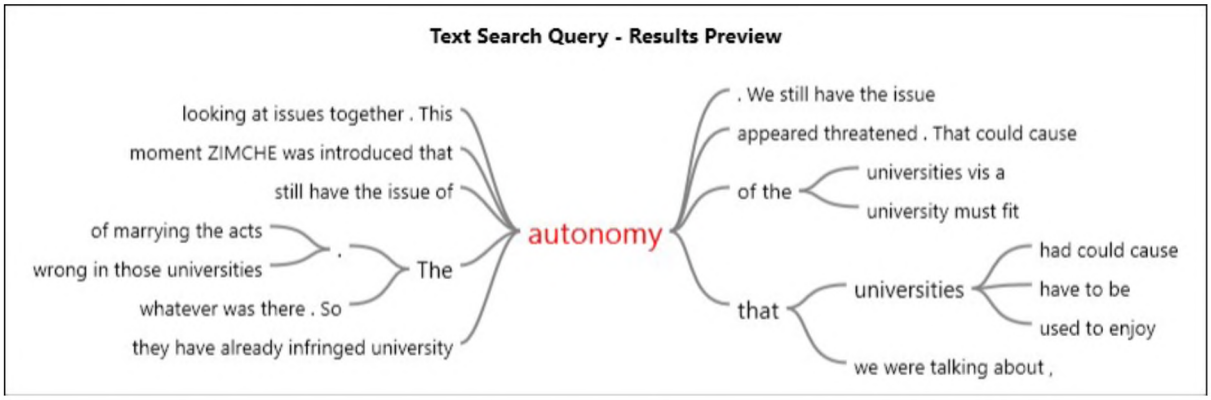

Figure 7.1 Frequency of reference to the discourse of autonomy by participants

Bearing in mind the institutionalised self-regulatory nature of QA, Z2 expressed that the establishment of ZIMCHE potentially became an attack on institutional autonomy. Imposition of external standards of performance on universities became an issue as universities had traditionally operated against self-determined norms of self-regulation. With QA through ZIMCHE, when academics at a 'university want to introduce a new programme we submit whatever is necessary and they will say we will come there to check on the physical facilities' (U1). This was experienced as a loss of academic autonomy, as it is only when ZIMCHE's 'recommendations are ok then you have your programme running' (U3). Such data clearly show concerns about what is seen to be an infringement of university autonomy with regards to deciding about university programmes. The ZIMCHE involvement in QA in universities was constructed in the data as evidence of distrust of academics' and institutions' traditional QA mechanisms. In the data, there was therefore a construction of efficient institutional functioning of universities before the introduction of ZIMCHE with regards to some participants. U7 remarked: 'I am a professional and I know what I am doing so ZIMCHE must leave me alone'.

As academics 'we would do a very good job in this university without ZIMCHE' (U1), 'Why should we have ZIMCHE yet we are qualified to run programmes in this university?' (U2). The participants implied that, since academics were entrusted by the State to do research and teaching, they needed free intellectual power to control and run their own affairs. The academics who participated in this study claimed capability to do a good job without ZIMCHE involvement.

Although University Senates still approved programmes at institutional level, it was ZIMCHE which had the final say as to what programmes could be offered. 'As ZIMCHE we can tell them 'No, you still have to ensure that this aspect meets the standards before we allow you to operate or start the programme' (Z1). A number of the participants in the universities pointed to this as being a discourse of distrust whereby ZIMCHE failed to trust the universities' own ability to make programme-offering decisions or to monitor the quality thereof. Clearly there was a feeling that ZIMCHE was a threat to freedoms that academics and universities were used to. As has occurred elsewhere (Luckett, 2007:104), there was a distinct distrust of governmental power through its new mode of regulation through ZIMCHE as a QA body. Thus freedoms in HE were experienced as being infringed as 'all of a sudden universities are asked to be answerable to somebody' (U2). The data from some university participants did not reflect on the extent to which institutional self-interest could lead to partiality and there was no sense from the universities that an external QA process was necessary for ensuring quality.

Conrad (2002) encourages academics to be accountable because governments are concerned with accountability of public money. In Zimbabwe universities are almost totally dependent on the State for the funding of their operations, which includes salaries. Increased reliance on the State for funding can be seen to have shifted the power balance in ways that means the State can justifiably demand increased monitoring power. As long as academics receive public funds for their teaching and research, the State can argue that they have to account for how those funds were used. Universities have to take 'responsibility for the service they provide and the public money they spend' (Harvey, 2008:11) and 'new practices of external quality assurance also seek to respond to public concerns that institutions provide educational value for money' (Dill, 2007:2). According to one ZIMCHE participant, ZIMCHE assisted by ensuring that universities were accountable for funds they received from the government and students (Z1). ZIMCHE also assured that programmes of study were organised and run properly hence ensuring that an appropriate educational experience was both promised and delivered (U4). This could be a contentious issue.

Institutional autonomy implies that HEIs have freedom to take decisions and operate with authority with regard to their own goals and programme matters. This means that where there is institutional autonomy, a one-size-fits-all approach in dealing with HE may not work as that may impede innovation and restrict institutional diversity and self-differentiation. Some participants indicated that the impact was also that ZIMCHE was characterised by rigidity because they quality assured all universities by adhering to the same rules and regulations although HEIs were different. Universities also had different mission objectives that one participant felt would be better quality assured if treated differently (U8). However, U3 expressed that ZIMCHE was at times perceived by study participants as playing a watchdog role and policing, which 'stifled growth' of universities.

While traditionally universities pursued 'teaching, scholarship and research on their own terms and according to their values and criteria' (du Toit, 2007:6), Z4 added that this was 'shaken' with the formation of ZIMCHE. Z1 and U3 added that the ZIMCHE role in QA in HE had made universities lose freedom to make institutional decisions with regards to QA. With ZIMCHE having oversight in the process of introducing academic programmes, participants U5 and U1 experienced it as a loss of institutional freedom, and their traditional freedoms to implement mandates as universities. One participant indicated that this caused 'some perception of authoritarian forces coming in and view ZIMCHE role as that of policing' (U3).

While ZIMCHE's oversight role of quality in universities and of curtailing institutional autonomy was dominant in the data, it was not without its critics. While discussants such as U1 and U2 consistently expressed loss of institutional and academic autonomy in universities in Zimbabwe, not everyone shared that opinion or only expressed in to a much lesser extent, so a discourse of tension emerged amongst some participants. For instance, participant U5 argued that autonomy had actually become a threat to quality, and criticised the ways in which universities had exercised their autonomy:

> This autonomy that universities had could cause negative perception because they were too autonomous. There were not answerable to any external organs. So the moment ZIMCHE was introduced that autonomy appeared threatened.

This was a discursive construction of HE as too crucial a sector for the country to be left alone, as they could 'no longer be trusted to benefit state and society if simply left on their own' (du Toit, 2007:7). Thus a 'discourse of trust' that academics would do the 'right' things was now open to question (McKenna & Boughey, 2014). Some participants felt that the situation in the HE sector in Zimbabwe needed a body to control the quality (U4; Z1). Such a feeling reflected

an emphasis for a more effective accountability in which universities and academics both needed to be held responsible (du Toit, 2007). Massification of HE raised issues of efficiency and accountability such that the HE sector could not be left alone but instead, as Z1 argued, there was a need for the State to effect some control through ZIMCHE. Thus the government of Zimbabwe through ZIMCHE needed to 'intervene in matters of institutional autonomy by setting rules and by defining how institutions should be governed' (Huisman, 2007:220). Although the role of ZIMCHE in QA in HE was frequently discursively constructed in the data as violating university autonomy, there was also the view that the sector could not just be left alone as many HEIs were being established for personal profits (Z1; Z3; U8) and 'there were bogus people who were out get people's money with substandard higher education' (U3). Such opinions implied that it was proper for the State to enact processes and structures to ensure the efficiency and accountability in universities. Therefore, these participants argued that it was problematic developments that took place in the HE sector which led to the formation of ZIMCHE as well as its approaches to QA. According to these participants, it was unsurprising that there was now resistance to ZIMCHE and an extensive drawing on the discourse of autonomy to justify this resistance.

The tension between these discourses of ZIMCHE as an infringement on autonomy and ZIMCHE as a necessary structure for quality assurance hinged on the adoption or not of presumptive principles in the name of a greater public benefit (Jonathan, 2001), which would justify state intervention measures in certain circumstances (Varghese & Martin, 2014). Autonomy, it can be argued, should not 'be an excuse for the State to retreat from its obligations' (Salmi, 2007:241), especially in the circumstance of fairly rapid massification, which had become a 'universal phenomenon' (Kehm & Pasternack, 2008) with considerable quality implications.

The view that ZIMCHE indicated a distrust of their own work was exacerbated by the sense that the ZIMCHE processes were excessively bureaucratic. U1 expressed:

> Accreditation through ZIMCHE takes too long. Nine months! That's not a joke! It's a long period because universities really need the programme when they apply and after paying the fees so we need to start teaching those programmes and add value to our universities.

U6 explained that ZIMCHE accreditation and audits were unnecessarily long and that, because the process was accompanied by stress for the university and individual academics, this was particularly unsettling. Some participants noted the configuration of the hierarchical structure

of ZIMCHE as an aspect of its bureaucratic nature. U3 expressed that paperwork and red tape were seen to be prevalent so that even tracking a submitted application was a challenge. U3 added that such red tape could potentially derail universities' or applicants' plans in meeting their mission objectives as they waited for approvals.

Travers (2007), however, asserts that what are seen as bureaucratic procedures are often necessary processes of transparency to reduce opportunities for corruption. In the data, not all the participants resented 'bureaucracy' within ZIMCHE. U7 and Z3 agreed that the time that ZIMCHE took to make approvals was justified as ZIMCHE needed to do a thorough assessment of each application to ensure quality in HE. Also, perceived red tape could be mainly a construction of critics of regulation in HE (Travers, 2007). 'People must not hate ZIMCHE just because you don't want to be supervised', said U6.

Another perceived loss of institutional autonomy was the issue of ZIMCHE requiring nationally uniform grading systems, which was another example of perceived loss of institutional autonomy. That was an area which traditionally fell under the purview of individual HEIs. ZIMCHE encouraged all universities to have the same system of marks (U8) and yet 'long back grading systems of students' academic achievement fell with individual universities but ZIMCHE now demands for uniformity in all final certification grades or to individual subjects' (U3). This implied that ZIMCHE defined what quality was expected for each grade. ZIMCHE's intervention in this regard was not received well. Some participants perceived ZIMCHE's requirement for a national grading scheme as unnecessary 'state surveillance' which could not add value to university establishments (U3; U2). The implication was that some participants were of the view that individual HEIs were supposed to make their own decisions.

Within the broader discourse of autonomy is what I called a discourse of decision-making which impacted on the ZIMCHE–university relationship. University participants believed HEIs had lost the freedom to make their own decisions on what they perceived best for their institutions. For example, universities had lost their autonomy and traditional freedom to decide on staff to employ as they saw fit. ZIMCHE approved staff qualifications yet 'universities know best who can teach in their institutions and not ZIMCHE' (U7). While some participants indicated that the setting of staff qualification requirements was an infringement on institutional autonomy, there are arguments to be made that staff qualifications are a key issue of quality and need to be set according to some minimum standards. Some discussants observed that 'ZIMCHE had to intervene when some church-owned universities employed unqualified academics with

belonging to the church being supreme' (U6). They were of the opinion that government needed to intervene in the way universities operated with some form of control through a QA body. From such discussants' viewpoints, ZIMCHE's existence was necessary to oversee governance and control in the universities. 'QA through ZIMCHE to steer the HE system towards state-defined goals' (Z1).

Universities in Zimbabwe had bicameral governance practices with Boards and Senates in place. However, U2 and U4 concurred that ZIMCHE exercised control in institutional governance, with the QA body being seen by some participants as overstepping its bounds. For instance, U2 said that quite often ZIMCHE influenced those appointed, particularly to the university Boards especially of state universities as such appointments usually considered individual political interests. 'Even those who got administrative positions were members of the ruling party' (U4).

'Universities are very often centres of political and intellectual dissent, and regimes are reluctant to allow institutions the freedom and autonomy that may contribute to instability' (Altbach, 2001:213). Hwami (2014) observes that university leaders in Zimbabwean universities have been turned into political party functionaries by the ruling party. Some of the participants indicated that ZIMCHE tended to prefer full control of all the goings-on in universities. The notion could be that it was crucial to control and steer universities to desired quality destinations, but even if the intentions were this laudable, the data indicates that this created acrimonious relationships with university administrators. The problem of external players influencing appointments could be that those appointed along political inclination primarily represented 'the views of the party not the direct concerns of the constituency' (Harvey, 2009:5). In Zimbabwe, interference in university administrative structures could be in response to the reality that most opposition leaders emanated from universities (*The Zimbabwean*, 2016). Furthermore, according to one participant university, administrations became 'heavily politicised by the ruling party and government, whose head is also the chancellor of all universities' (U3). Thus it seemed universities were also political battlegrounds. The study data implied that party politics dominated in influencing administrative styles in universities, which could ultimately impact on quality of HE.

The data indicated that at times ZIMCHE got anonymous information about events in universities, even about student abuse by academics which it went on to investigate (Z1). As outlined in the in the universities' administrative structures, such an event could be regarded a

typical case for the Staff Disciplinary Committee that oversaw staff disciplinary issues in universities. Such 'interference', whereby ZIMCHE acted on anonymous information rather than handing it over to the institutional structures, could be one of the reasons why some participants perceived ZIMCHE as policing the universities (U2; U1; Z1). Furthermore, this perceived interference could lead to HEIs concealing incidents from ZIMCHE in order to protect some of their own (U2). It therefore seemed that ZIMCHE made universities' academic Boards and their committees redundant, as they increasingly lacked real power which seemed to be becoming entrenched in ZIMCHE. Hodgson (1999) encourages QA bodies to support and not undermine institutions' strategies and efforts to enhance quality in their institutions.

7.3 Discourse of sustenance

Analysis of participants' voices also showed the dominance of a discourse that I have called the discourse of sustenance. This regards funding mechanisms of the HE sector that existed and expressed by many participants as depicted in Figure 7.2 below.

Figure 7.2 The discourse of sustenance as expressed in terms of funding by participants

This discourse constructed ZIMCHE as being sustained, financially and structurally, by the institutions as it 'survived on university purses' (U4). This was a crucial discourse that had an impact on ZIMCHE–universities relationship. Although 'in reality all existing QA agencies are highly dependent on government' (Materu, 2007:xvii), some participants constructed universities as being treated as 'cash cows' of ZIMCHE. There was a belief that, since ZIMCHE was created 'to advise the Minister on all higher education matters and to develop and recommend policy on higher education including the establishment of public institutions and advise the Minister accordingly' (Zimbabwe Government, 2006), this was often being done in the interests of sustaining and increasing the structure and power of ZIMCHE itself.

To some extent it appeared that the economic challenges that Zimbabwe had faced over the years had caused budgetary constraints to such an extent that it was inevitable that ZIMCHE

received inadequate state support. 'Our government is just broke' commented Z4, to the extent that it had owed one university $11.4 million since 2010, for students who were on cadetship (Gumbo, 2016). This context led to a cost-sharing practice as the government was unable to significantly finance ZIMCHE. Johnstone (2003) suggests that many countries are becoming increasingly dependent on cost sharing for the financial survival of their institutions in the face of extreme austerity. Cost sharing refers to a shift of the HE cost burden from exclusive or near exclusive reliance on government to some financial reliance upon parents and/or students, either in the form of tuition fees or of 'user charges' to cover the costs of formerly governmentally- or institutionally-provided funding (Johnstone, 2001:403). In the 2009 Budget Statement the Minister of Finance highlighted the need to spread the burden of financing the sector remarking that:

> Mr Speaker Sir, the expenditure requirements to restore quality education in our higher institutions make it unavoidable that Government shares some of the costs of higher education with the parents. This also improves accountability among students in universities ... as well as ownership of the institutions' facilities. Honourable Members will have noted the many instances where, surprisingly, even well-endowed parents display inability to pay higher education fees when they were able to get their children through ordinary and advanced level education without State assistance (Shizha & Kariwo, 2011:121).

The participants in this study indicated that such cost sharing of university expenses was extended, such that university income sustained the expense of ZIMCHE.

In Zimbabwe, every university, private or public, paid ZIMCHE a $5 fee for every undergraduate, $10 for a postgraduate and $15 for a doctoral student every semester (U1; Z2). The impact of this 'user pays' system was that some participants resented the funding mechanisms of ZIMCHE whereby it was dependent on university contributions for its survival. Participants were clear: 'that frustrates us very much because that is whether you have the money or not' (U3). In fact 'ZIMCHE came to chew the budget yet all universities are struggling in terms of getting funding and resources' (U2). U3 argued that 'we cannot be subjected to such large amounts because look at us, we are growing, we are trying to come up with infrastructure and we have to pay now nine thousand dollars to ZIMCHE'. U4 also stressed:

> We have state universities and we have got private universities. They are not the same in funding. The state universities get more funding than private and they are expected to meet the same infrastructural requirements as their state

> counterparts. But when they come here to a private university they are tough with us demanding something from whatever money we charge students. That's an unfair practice.

Such data excerpts constructed ZIMCHE as a burdensome organisation as its demands were 'often outrageous and costly in terms of finances' (Z6). As universities financed ZIMCHE according to their respective enrolments from each student's paid or expected fees, universities' contributions became the main means of support for ZIMCHE's budget (Z3). It was interesting that the ZIMCHE participants were very vocal in their self-critique with regards to the funding mechanisms that existed.

Even though ZIMCHE was legally empowered to control quality in universities, the body had been put in place in an economically-difficult context without having sufficient funding mechanisms of the body available for it to function efficiently (Z1; Z4). Z2 observed that ZIMCHE had challenges which limited the effective assurance of quality. ZIMCHE had 'inadequate resources not only for carrying out the planned activities but also to continuously get exposure to how others were doing what we are doing' (Z1).

It was significant that most participants across the universities indicated that ZIMCHE reliance on universities for budgetary support was unsustainable. It was repeatedly indicated that it was the responsibility of the government to ensure the body's survival and not the universities' (U2; U1; U3). 'Since ZIMCHE is a regulatory body that obviously works with the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, one would assume that its finances must come from the government as far as resources are concerned', U3 explained. The discourse of sustenance focused on the economic effects of the subscriptions that universities paid for ZIMCHE operations. The general perception was that ZIMCHE required alternative funding mechanisms without largely relying on universities, or they interacted with institutions in ways which ensured that they would be sustained as an organisation rather than in a way focused on quality assurance concerns. However, the mechanisms that prevailed reflected the extent to which government was financially constrained.

Given the budgetary constraints that existed in the country, contextual factors and funding mechanisms had negatively impacted on ZIMCHE–universities' relationship. Participants U3 and U7 were of the perception that cost sharing in ZIMCHE's funding mechanisms contributed to the QA body's unpopularity since universities faced enormous economic challenges. Every university had to pay the subscriptions even when students had not paid their fees. Since some universities faced challenges in paying their subscriptions, ZIMCHE operations were affected

to an extent that some institutional visits were cancelled due to budgetary constraints (Z2). This implied that it was also inevitable that ZIMCHE faced some challenges in the achievement of its mission objectives in QA in HE, raising questions about the quality of its QA too. As Goastellac indicates, 'quality matters and quality cannot be dissociated of [sic] the level of funding' (2005:3). For instance, U3 observed that follow-up visits at universities on QA issues were 'very few unless or until there is some crisis'. ZIMCHE was battling to make general reviews of the entire population of universities and holding inadequate QA training workshops due to limited resources (Z1). That meant that ZIMCHE was also compromised in meeting its mission objectives as a QA body. 'We are not receiving adequate funding from the government for us to carry out audits that are supposed to be carried out', remarked Z2.

The broad 'university pays' model was consistently seen to be unsustainable in the economic climate that existed in Zimbabwe. For instance, at the 2015 graduation ceremony the chairman of Great Zimbabwe University remarked:

> We have this year, again, been restricted in building the university at its original site, next to the Great Zimbabwe World Heritage Site, due to the unavailability of funds. The funds required are in excess of $300 million for just the admin block and heritage studies centre. These funds are not available and are unlikely to be availed anytime soon.

The concern that the funding mechanisms meant that ZIMCHE was unsustainable and constrained in its activities was extended by some participants to raise questions about impartiality and power. One participant suggested that the funding model potentially made the QA body compromised in its ability to make independent decisions. 'Because when I finance you, your role is already compromised because it's me who makes you survive. I am the one who makes you go on a day to day basis' (U5). It was crucially important therefore that some participants implied that ZIMCHE required other self-sustenance mechanisms to ensure an objective independence.

ZIMCHE's reliance on universities' subscriptions, as discussed in the section on ZIMCHE's budgetary constraints, was potentially tied to the discourse of resistance from the same HEIs. 'It's us as universities who fund ZIMCHE so who are they to dictate things to us?' U1 asked rhetorically. This suggested that there was a likelihood that ZIMCHE could be diminished in its potential for influence in QA in the HE sector. 'We have not been able to meet our goals as an organisation due to some opposition from some universities', Z4 said.

Whilst the cost sharing was criticised by some participants, others supported it as an alternative to the ZIMCHE's sustenance mechanism, given the economic circumstances under which ZIMCHE undertook the quality assurance of HE. 'Universities are the beneficiaries of ZIMCHE's quality assurance and therefore have to pay for its survival', said U5. U3 added: 'Personally, ZIMCHE is our organisation as universities so why should we not support it financially?' Such sentiments supported the necessity of cost sharing in Zimbabwe's HE context, which supports the idea that 'those who benefit should at least share in the costs' (Johnstone, 2003:4). It shows the diversity of perceptions about the funding mechanisms that existed in the HE context in Zimbabwe and also indicates that two somewhat competing discourses are being drawn upon. On the one hand, there was a discourse of autonomy that indicated that ZIMCHE imposed on the institutional freedoms and on the other hand there was a discourse of sustenance that saw ZIMCHE as serving an important role for the universities, and one which some participants were willing to financially support.

Z1 and Z2 expressed that the idea that universities' financial contribution to the sustenance of ZIMCHE was generally, though not unanimously, considered to be fair. ZIMCHE is financed based on an assessment of its benefits and costs, thereby distributing costs between government and universities. Johnstone (2003) reminds us that all universities across the world are battling to access scarce public revenues; this is especially the case in countries such as Zimbabwe which is broadly characterised by resource scarcity. The 'logic' invoked here is that any service that gives a benefit to a particular individual or institution should be funded by that individual or institution. At the time of this research study, the level of state funding, the main source of income in Zimbabwean universities, was inadequate, partly because an increasing share of available resources was being directed towards other vital needs such as feeding of the nation due to recurrent droughts in the country over the years.

That universities pay ZIMCHE for QA service can be seen to be a neoliberal understanding of education as being 'user pays' – that is, the understanding that any service that gives a benefit to a particular institution should be funded by that institution. Quality in the university is seen to be an institutional good that accrues benefits to the individual university and the individual students within it (Kocaqi, 2015:432). This logic of this human capital model of the knowledge economy then dictates that the user (university and students) that benefits from the private goods should pay for them, and thus it is this shared logic which leads to universities having to pay directly for national quality assurance. However, such logics are not without their critics as many would argue that the university is not just a private good, it is also a public good which

should benefit the entire nation (Calhoun, 2006). For this reason, the state should invest in universities because, like a health system or a police system, the university sector provides benefits to the whole country. Following this 'public good' argument, the state should also subsidise whatever mechanisms are needed to ensure that the education provided by the universities is of good quality.

The 'private good' understanding of the human capital model of education and the 'public good' understanding of the social model of education would each argue for different funding sources to dominate, but both assume that there are resources available, be it from the state or from the students. Materu (2007) advises that countries seeking to develop QA bodies have to consider their resources available, as it is always difficult for any nation to maintain quality standards where resources are in short supply (Teferra, 2007). In the context of Zimbabwe, sentiments were that HE deserved to be treated as a priority area. 'Our government must find money for ZIMCHE operations as a lot of money is spent on useless things' (U1). To justify such sentiment, in the 2016 national budget the HE ministry received the fifth vote of the national budget, which could discursively construct HE as a non-crucial sector based on the budget allocation from the national fiscus.

It seemed that the role of and even the birth of ZIMCHE in QA in HE in Zimbabwe was framed along global imperatives, with national interest in regulatory compliance to quality in the HEIs. While ZIMCHE, like any QA agency, would be expected to have an impact that led to the improvement of quality in universities (Kajaste, Prades & Scheuthle, 2016), achievement of its mandate faced some contextual constrictions regarding resource mechanisms. It would be almost a mission impossible to expect quality results from ZIMCHE in the current context. ZIMCHE mainly survived on university contributions for its financial support yet economic challenges had not spared universities either. Universities were literally struggling to survive economically but ZIMCHE was seen to dismiss individual universities' capacities to pay the annual contributions (U2). While many participants experienced ZIMCHE as a threat to university autonomy, there was also a notion that the funding model of ZIMCHE compromised its autonomy to undertake impartial quality reviews of the institutions that paid for it.

7.4 The discourse of fear

Thus far I have discussed two discourses that emerged from the data: that of control and autonomy, where questions were raised as to the constraints ZIMCHE processes put on

institutional autonomy and academic freedom, and the related discourse of sustainability, where questions were asked as to who should pay for national quality assurance processes and what the implications of this are for such autonomy. Implicated in both of these discourses was another discourse that emerged from the available data, that of fear. Some discussants' perceptions illustrated that the ZIMCHE–university relationship was marked by fear as depicted in Figure 7.1 below.

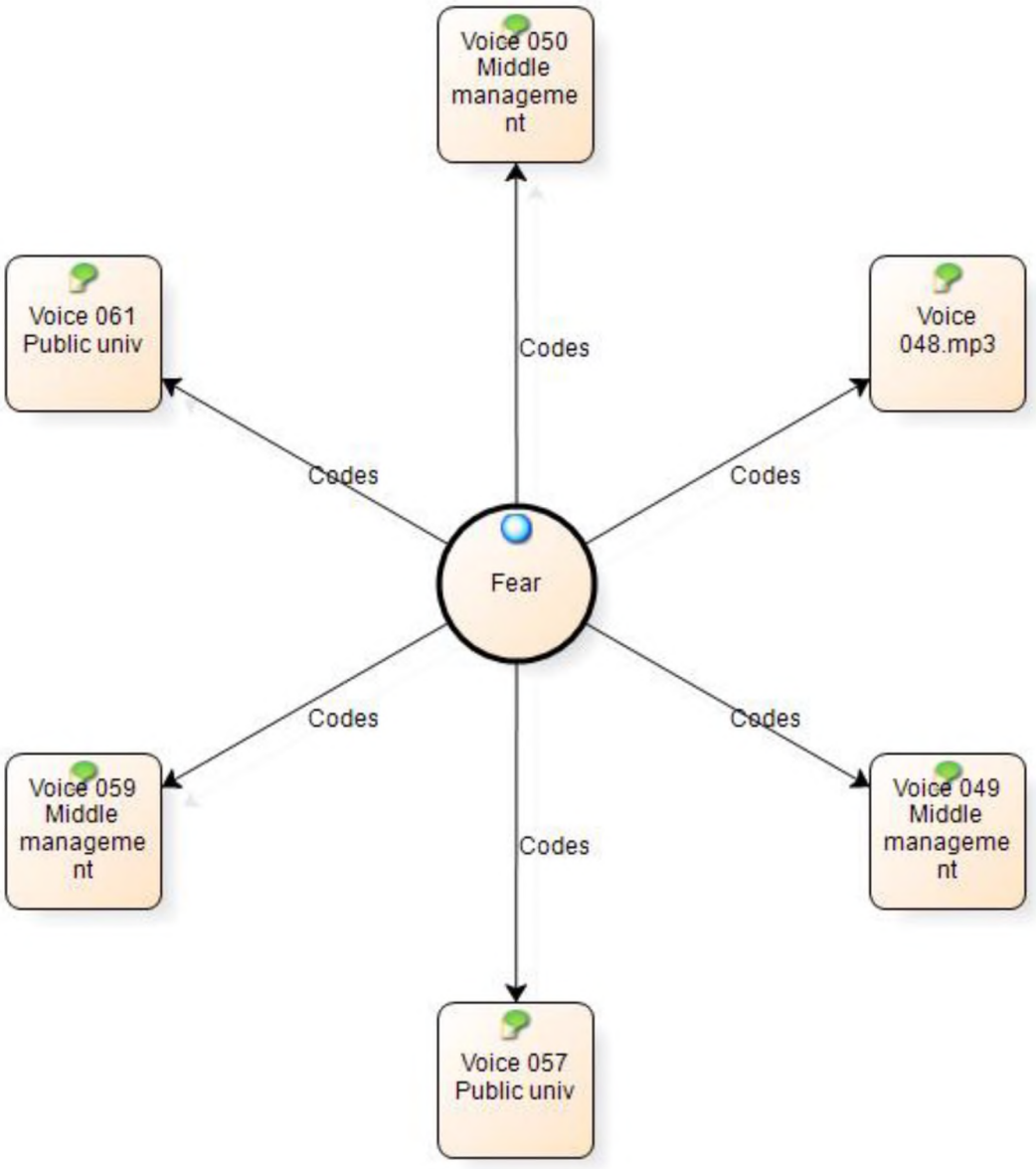

Figure 7.3 Participants who expressed fear in the ZIMCHE-university relationship. Obtained from the NVivo qualitative data analysis programme.

Some participants indicated that they were at times afraid of ZIMCHE as a QA body. Participants stated that '… the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education was introduced as kind

of a policeman' (U1). '… many institutions feel that ZIMCHE is there to punish universities' (Z1). U2 also added that 'We started with ZIMCHE like a policeman of universities', with Z1 adding that 'when we [ZIMCHE] started it was like we were like a very big animal that was just there to devour all the institutions'.

This discourse of fear was related to that of autonomy as it was regularly tied to the issue of the extent of the role played by the State in universities. In the Zimbabwean HE system, the head of state is the chancellor of all public universities (Chidindi, 2012). This is the circumstance in which ZIMCHE was established and operated on behalf of the government with regards to QA in HE. According to some participants, failing to comply with the new QA mechanisms imposed by ZIMCHE could be interpreted as a direct challenge of the chancellor and head of state. There was a sense in the data that universities were unaware of the exact consequences of failures to comply but were fearful as to their reach.

ZIMCHE as a QA body was 'capable of suing and … performing all such acts as a body corporate may by law perform' (The Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education Act, 2006:2). Some participants felt universities' fear of the ZIMCHE was caused by a lack of awareness of how the newly set up QA body would react towards failure to comply with QA requirements in the universities. For instance, ZIMCHE had the power:

> … to revoke the Charter of any private HEI if it breaches its Charter in the case of a private university or Act in the case of a public university or if any HEI failed to function in a proper manner, or even close any institution among other powers that are vested in it (Z1).

Participants saw the potential reach of ZIMCHE as dauntingly broad: 'ZIMCHE can arrive at any time and tell you to close down if you do not comply with what they want' (U2). That ZIMCHE could take any action it deemed fit on HE providers using the legal framework (Doc 4) suggests that some universities may be justified in fearing the QA body. The data repeatedly indicated that, with the powers vested in ZIMCHE, the QA body had the potential to bring about fear, intentionally or unintentionally, in the academics in universities. After a group interview one participant sent a message to be called so that he could make some clarification on his contribution. When called, he indicated that he was concerned about continuing his participation in the study as this might have implications for future ZIMCHE visits to his university. I reassured him as to anonymity and that I have collected data from a number of academics at a number of universities who would be reported on by code. This reassured him but his concern clearly reveals the extent to which some participants were afraid of ZIMCHE.

Another danger of this discourse of fear was the potential it had for eliciting a superficial and uncritical compliance-level response to ZIMCHE demands.

Dill (2007) observes that overly focusing on external control rather than institutional responsibility for QA can encourage a culture of compliance in which institutions invest time and effort on developing quality infrastructures to satisfy a QA body rather than on active efforts to assure and improve institutional quality. This brings in the need for universities to become willing participants in the whole QA process and practice, with them understanding and feeling ownership of the quality systems so that they contribute to quality goals. This desire for more authentic and engaged relationships between universities and ZIMCHE was repeatedly expressed in interviews with both ZIMCHE staff and university academics (Z1; Z2; U4). There was an indication that challenges to achieve QA goals could be experienced when universities lacked intrinsic motivation for quality within universities.

Some participants suggested that the discourse of fear in QA was necessary or had certain positive implications. There had been 'chaos in the HE sector that required a body that put things in order' (Z1). 'Zimbabwe required a strong organisation that could put HE on course' (U7). There was an implication made fairly often that a level of fear of ZIMCHE served to enhance quality in the HE sector as this drove universities to make sure they made an effort to meet ZIMCHE standards (Z2; U3; U2).

These participants seemed to suggest that, as a result of such hierarchical arrangements, ZIMCHE could ensure that 'principles and practices of higher education are not being eroded or flouted' (Harvey, 2008:14). The desire to enhance and maintain quality justifies the reason for a QA agency's powers to refuse the licensing of the establishment of any HEI or even to order a complete closure if minimum standards are not met. According to some of the participants, one of the reasons why ZIMCHE was established was to directly and rigorously address the issue of substandard HEIs (Z1; Z2; Z1; U2) as 'there were a lot of these universities that were just mushrooming across the country and programmes that were just starting' (Z3). Harvey (2008:14) emphasises the need for some level of control in the HE sector to ensure integrity, 'in particular making it difficult for poor or rogue providers to continue operating'. 'ZIMCHE has the authority to force a university to close or stop a programme for that matter as long as minimum requirements aren't there' (Z3). While the discourse of fear was noted in the data, and was alternatively seen to suppress real engagement with quality indicators or to

ensure the adherence to minimum standards, there was also a discourse that seemed in direct contradiction to this, as I discuss next.

7.5 Discourse of contempt

Significant among participants was a discourse of contempt – the feeling that some participants did not care about ZIMCHE and wanted nothing to do with it. Some participants revealed that, despite legislation that gave ZIMCHE immense power, they were no longer afraid of the QA body. U1 said:

> No matter how much they make their noise and after making their recommendations for us to close anything we just … defy ZIMCHE. That's why whenever they come they make their recommendation saying there isn't this and that and so forth but nothing shuts as we move on as if nothing happened.

U4 added that ZIMCHE was a 'toothless bulldog'. U3 indicated that: 'Here they wrote recommendations and now some years down the line nothing has happened and we are still going with ZIMCHE doing nothing'. Thus, to some participants, ZIMCHE was seen to only send empty threats. Although some participants in this study agreed to the principle of QA through ZIMCHE, some disagreed with the mechanisms that the body employed. Such participants spoke with a degree of disdain about the national body.

The discourse of contempt had significance in the relationship of universities and ZIMCHE. Some universities even bypassed ZIMCHE and dealt directly with the HE ministry (or even the President as Chancellor of Universities), a trend of the pre-ZIMCHE establishment era. Clearly the Zimbabwean context had other political players who had significant powers to influence QA beside ZIMCHE.

> We are no longer very much afraid of ZIMCHE. Yes, they supervise quality here but they don't have much power at all. The power is with the Ministry of Higher Education. That's why you find that we are more worried about what they say (U3).

> Even if ZIMCHE wants to mess up with [university x] it will reported to the President straight away as the Chancellor (U1).

There was credible evidence in the data that some of the political discourse that prevailed in Zimbabwe also contributed to the emergence of contempt of ZIMCHE. 'If you look in the whole ZIMCHE structure you can see that those jobs were for the boys and girls. So you will realise that the structure was built for people who were already known', U2 said. U3 concurred that

the top administrative echelon of ZIMCHE were politically appointed. That implied that effective assurance of quality in universities could be a challenging task as political figures could use their political muscles to achieve objectives that guaranteed their survival. This reiterates a central finding of this study, which is the extent to which contextual factors are capable of influencing the implementation of QA systems. In my Master's study, I observed that some of the administrative members of one university were appointed along lines of political allegiance (Chidindi 2012) and this seems to have been the case in the formation of ZIMCHE too. This phenomenon of governments attempting to control HE through proxies is not peculiar to Zimbabwe (O'Mahony & Garavan, 2012). In the context of Zimbabwe, successful implementation of QA in HE was difficult without the involvement of higher authorities that had political powers, with significant barriers to successful implementation of QA.

7.6 The discourse of confidence

In almost direct contradiction to the two discourses of fear and contempt, was one of confidence in ZIMCHE. In the data there was also a construction of ZIMCHE as a colleague and compatriot in QA in universities.

> Initially there was quite a lot of resistance from us as universities. We didn't understand as we saw it as an instrument to force itself on universities yet they are there to help improve the quality of higher education in the country (U2).

There was a sense in some of the interviews that this confidence has built up over time. While at the beginning 'ZIMCHE was not very well received in some quarters … we are now working together very well' (U1). U2 added that while ZIMCHE had not been well received by most universities 'it's much better now'.

> Instead now that ZIMCHE uses engagement which means they want your input … you can still bring in your own way of seeing things. The whole process is more like a process of trying to assist rather than policing (U6).

Even participants from ZIMCHE noted that universities had developed some confidence in the QA body. 'When we started … universities were seeing us as just a regulator who were just there to come any time and say stop this and that' (Z4). Z3 also noted that 'a good number of universities now view ZIMCHE as a friend, as a colleague'. These excerpts show that, to some extent and in some cases, a cooperative discourse had helped improve the ZIMCHE–

universities relationship. The perspectives denoted a change of course of perception of ZIMCHE by universities with regard to QA in universities. It was clear that there had been a shift from a discourse of suspicion and mistrust to a more collegial one. Clearly expressed by participants was that ZIMCHE had discarded the 'bossy type of approach' to QA issues in universities (U5; U6), subsequently leading to trust of the QA body. This reflected the strength of democratising QA issues from autocratic forms (Harvey, 2009). Due to a change of approach to QA, ZIMCHE seems to be increasingly discursively constructed as a colleague after having adopted contextual imperatives that demanded approaching QA issues as partners of universities. Arguably, such a collegial approach to QA in HE is based on the assumption that academics are governed by professional ethics, integrity and reasonableness (Minerva, 1982), and that this is recognised by the quality assurance body.

It is important to note that there was an enabling element that led to the improvement of the ZIMCHE–universities relationship referred to above. There was a discourse of proprietorship of the QA in universities by the universities themselves. 'The creation of quality units in universities … was a good idea as we set our own services with ZIMCHE coming in just to help' (U8). Participant ZI added that:

> Establishing QA units was a good idea as ZIMCHE came in as an adviser. Universities therefore began to feel ownership of QA in universities through the establishment of QA directorates, also known as QA units, as forms of QA agencies which are responsible for daily ensuring, maintaining and improving QA practices in the universities (ZI).

QA units were internal bodies, staffed and managed by the university and therefore worked for and with structures within the university. However, they liaised with ZIMCHE on QA matters and indeed their formation was as per the recommendations of ZIMCHE. Materu (2007) argues that QA units can transform a university and raise quality levels. The potential impact was that establishing QA units therefore ensured that universities put in place their own mechanisms to ensure ways of creating more realistic pictures of how they changed in terms of QA activities. QA at institutional level could potentially bring about positive effects (Kleijnen, Dolmans, Willems & van Hout, 2011) as that was a way of employing an underlying quality culture that reflected the idea of delegated responsibility to stakeholders who directly engage with HE in HEIs (Harvey, 2008). Through QA directorates or units, universities had more opportunities to review themselves. They got the chance to know their strengths and weaknesses by looking at themselves in a 'mirror'. They could therefore decide for themselves on strategies they could

use in QA, as well as be able to make their own decisions on quality improvement. Thus there was a likelihood that universities became self-critical and reflective of their institutional missions and objectives, unlike when QA is solely enforced from the outside, that is, if they possessed the fitness for purpose discourse of quality. Since there was a likelihood of universities obtaining a quality culture through the QA units, it meant that could also lead to the establishment of universities that understood themselves in terms of their strengths and weaknesses, their potentials and limitations. Additionally, such universities could potentially become more successful in carrying out their educational missions and mandates.

While, through the establishment of QA units, universities could feel responsible for their own quality as they monitored and took corrective measures at institutional level (O'Mahony & Garavan, 2012), the approach lacked resource support from ZIMCHE. ZIMCHE just told universities to establish QA directorates but didn't provide ideas on how to fund or run those directorates (U1; U7; U4). An external QA body could connect the internal QA directorates to improve the internal institutional QA environment and processes in order to achieve the same institutional and national broad goals of HE provision (Cheng and Tam, 1997). Materu (2007) further suggests that the establishment of QA units must be supported in the form of workshops. What appeared the case was that ZIMCHE lacked adequate resources to effectively carry out its mandate (Z1; Z2; U2). Therefore the context in which ZIMCHE operated could be understood in the light of limited resource availability to support the organisation (Z2; U1; U2). Thus there could be a myth about the efficacy and work of QA units (Harvey, 2006) unless the whole QA framework capacity was developed.

7.7 Conclusion

This chapter has reflected on the complexities of the discourses by which the ZIMCHE–universities relationship was constructed in the data. An attempt was made to use critical lenses that were capable of revealing the underlying discursive mechanisms. Different discourses that emanated from the different participants' perspectives on the ZIMCHE–universities relationship showed that people construct meaning differently across social contexts (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2008) and showed different understandings of the same phenomenon (Fairclough, 2003). For example, while cost sharing was welcomed by some participants, others saw this as a constraint on QA processes. This revealed the extent to which reality is differentiated and how participants experienced reality differently. Having discussed five

discourses that emerged in the data about ZIMCHE–universities relationship in this chapter, I now turn in Chapter 7 to discuss two main discourses that emerged in regards to ZIMCHE policy issues.

Chapter 8

Discourses related to ZIMCHE policy

ZIMCHE QA guidelines potentially provide a basis for ZIMCHE to assess their current practices, determine areas for improvement, and guide continuing QA development. While the previous chapter discusses some of the composite discourses regarding ZIMCHE–universities relationship, this chapter continues to look at discourses related to ZIMCHE policy and policy implementation on QA in HE as outlined in the Methodology Chapter 5. In this chapter, I focus only on three main discourses that emerged from the data, i.e. *compliance*, *control* and *gold standard*, which arguably subsume those described thus far. As I do this, I make an attempt to extrapolate the context that shaped policy since it is crucial to recognise and carefully scrutinise this (Ozga, 2005; Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard & Henry, 1997) from which such discourses emerge.

8.1 Discourse of compliance

A discourse of compliance was observable in the data. This was the discourse where universities simply followed the 'letter of the law' without really engaging with it. They just did what they were told without questioning or taking it seriously, just as Z7 expressed: 'We just need to follow ZIMCHE orders otherwise we will be in trouble'. The discourse emerged in relation to a number of different issues and the recruitment of persons in the university was a typical example where it was evident. ZIMCHE did not have direct control of recruitment of staff in universities. However, while universities could enter, at least theoretically, into contracts and appoint staff members as per their own evaluations, in practice ZIMCHE demanded that academics had to have certain qualifications for certain levels of employment. In this way, ZIMCHE was empowered to regulate qualifications for any person that was to be appointed to the teaching staff of an institution of HE (ZIMCHE, 2006). They had to be 'suitable for their positions and possess appropriate qualifications and experience' (Doc 8). For example, a lecturer had to have 'at least a Master's degree in the relevant area taught' while 'an Honours degree in the area taught will be expected' for an assistant lecturer (Doc 9). Three years' teaching experience at university level and satisfactory performance was required before tenure could be granted (Doc 8). So it was that, while ZIMCHE did not dictate who any university employed to do the job, they were seen to interfere with the individual appointments by

checking on academics' qualifications and carrying out periodic academic staff audits with details of staff qualifications provided to ZIMCHE (Docs 4, 5, 6 & 9).

The implication of the discourse of compliance with regard to staff recruitment was that universities had to employ properly-qualified personnel so that minimum academic standards could be set and maintained (Doc 6). Thus whoever universities employed had to be qualified, which could be regarded as a fit for purpose notion of quality. It can of course be argued that no university can achieve quality without well-qualified academic professionals (Altbach, 2009) as there is a relationship between academic qualifications and quality enhancement in HE (Barnett, 1992). ZIMCHE therefore acted as the watchdog against the employment of unqualified or under-qualified personnel, which could be a serious threat to quality (van Rooij, 2002). As a QA body, ZIMCHE therefore exercised some control mechanisms of the HE sector in order to maintain Zimbabwean HE reputation and retain public trust through ensuring that universities complied with requirements regarding the human resources that found their way into the university sector.

In exercising its power to control staff recruitment, ZIMCHE had gone further and set a higher threshold for every university lecturer to have acquired a PhD by 2017 (Z1) while 'the requirement that academics had to possess qualifications which were higher than that they taught could be seen as a loss of autonomy' (Z2). Thus ZIMCHE had set up its own parameters for academic qualifications, such as 'highest qualification and area of specialisation of lecturers in the universities', while it conducted 'a qualifications audit in all universities' (U1; also see Doc 5). The underlying ideology could possibly be that the more educated a lecturer was the more effective he/she was to teach in the university. PhD holders were therefore perceived as better teachers at university level. Indeed, some participants decried the universities' loss of institutional capacity to employ whoever they deemed fit (U5). Compliance with the qualifications of academics requirement meant that participants perceived that universities no longer had the freedom to employ academics solely according to their own discretion (U2; U1). This was experienced as being a severe curtailment of institutional autonomy. Freedom to employ academics in whom HEIs saw potential to assist them achieve set goals could be one of the fundamental academic freedoms among a myriad of other freedoms (Z1; U2; U5).

While some participants were concerned about a decline in the autonomy of the academe (Z3), others experienced this as 'interfering' with the appointment of staff in universities by ZIMCHE. While ZIMCHE has set caps for staff qualifications, this aligns with the contention

in the literature that external QA bodies usually impose their own version of quality on the academy (Dill, 1992a; Dill, Massy, Williams & Cook, 1996). Clearly the impact was that participants were worried about ZIMCHE demands regarding qualifications for lecturers, with some even having prospects of losing their jobs (U3; U5).

8.2 Discourse of control

ZIMCHE's QA was influenced by the ZIMCHE Act Chapter 25.08 of 2006 that contained the imperatives pertaining to the roles of ZIMCHE and those of universities. The ZIMCHE Act of 2006 first gave ZIMCHE its legitimisation as an overseer of quality in HE in Zimbabwe and in the regional and international community; and secondly it assisted ZIMCHE in creating an environment in which universities were encouraged to comply with its discursive construction of the notion of quality of HE, thus giving ZIMCHE power to enact particular quality assurance processes in HE in Zimbabwe. This was crucial as when the ZIMCHE Act was implemented, roles, responsibilities and relationships between ZIMCHE and universities were defined.

The ZIMCHE Act empowered ZIMCHE 'to promote and co-ordinate education provided by institutions of higher education and to act as a regulator in the determination and maintenance of standards' (Zimbabwe Government, 2006:4). Thus ZIMCHE was empowered 'to evaluate institutions on a regular and objective basis, that is, their courses, programmes and degrees that they offered' (Zimbabwe Government, 2006:1). This implied that the ZIMCHE Act set the parameters of scope and functioning. It meant that as a QA body ZIMCHE would be able to receive feedback, help set collective priorities, and disseminate good QA practices in universities, among other roles. This is meant to be the international overarching objective of external QA in HEIs – to make a contribution to the quality of higher education. However, the data indicated that in many cases this contribution was experienced as one of control.

It was ZIMCHE policy that universities should run sustainable programmes in line with their missions (Doc 4) and 'carry out their purposes for which they were established' (Z2). It was therefore ZIMCHE policy that universities pursued their mandates, which made the basis of their formation as contained in the Acts or Charters they had been given at their establishments (ZIMCHE Act, 2006; Doc 4). That reflected the discourse of quality as fitness for/of purpose as a guiding principle in ZIMCHE policy. Such policy is seemingly ideal as every university had its specific and defined goals and objectives within the national context and its own responsibilities and procedures as spelt out in appropriate ordinances and statutes.

ZIMCHE encouraged the setting up of internal QA units, already discussed in Chapter 7 but here discussed as a QA control mechanism. Z2 observed that QA units carried out regular internal quality audits and reviews while they liaised with ZIMCHE. QA units also advised different sectors of the university on means to enhance quality at institutional level (Z1). Z3 indicated that QA units whose establishment ZIMCHE encouraged enhanced quicker institutional adjustment to QA as they were more easily accepted than a concept that was conceived from outside. However, U7 and U5 agreed that putting in place QA units indicated better democracy as the constituency themselves had some control, which gave the process more chances to be successful, truthful and faithfully carried out. This implies that ZIMCHE's approach to QA seemed to be an attempt to involve players that were found within the universities like the current students and front line staff (Cheng & Tam, 1997). Since insiders were involved they arguably provided more insight, understood issues better and were, therefore, 'supportive and sharing' (Ceci & Peters et al., in Harvey, 2009:6). Through the support of the establishment of internal QA units, it seems ZIMCHE attempted to tie its QA processes into bigger debates in the literature around control. However, it could also be argued that this support for internal accountability was also a form of quality control, but now from a distance. U3 expressed that QA units were actually ZIMCHE's eyes in the universities, with U8 observing that the option for QA units was in response to some of the resistance that ZIMCHE had experienced.

Another discourse of control was observed in student enrolment in universities. ZIMCHE demanded regular updates on student enrolment both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels (Docs 4, 5 & 9). It seemed that the idea was driven by the philosophy that access to HE had to match resources such as teachers and libraries so that students obtained quality of HE (Bloom & Rosovsky, 2007), as learning takes place in a dynamic environment involving numerous factors such as student numbers (Watters and Watters, 2007). This resonates well with the idea that there is a strong nexus between quality of HE and matching resources. For instance, control over student enrolment could imply avoidance of unmanageable student–lecturer ratios which could complicate interaction. Therefore, control of student numbers could also ensure availability of classrooms needed to accommodate the number of students so that: first, they had free movement and easy access to desks; secondly, sat comfortably with sufficient space between the desks; and thirdly, had easy vision of the lecturer and demonstration boards (Doc 5).

Although ZIMCHE controlled student enrolment in universities, other contextual elements that dictated universities' actions impacted on student enrolment and ZIMCHE did not seem to take these sufficiently into account, according to the participants. The context had forced some universities to digress from their primary plans. Universities received inadequate funding from the State (Z1; Z3; U1) and that was one of the reasons one university that had been established to cater for an enrolment of just ten thousand students, had a figure that had ballooned to twenty-two thousand to raise more money (Z1). Circumstances had therefore caused ZIMCHE face challenges in controlling enrolment patterns. It seemed universities made autonomous decisions through adjusting to the contextual demands, regardless of ZIMCHE requirements. Some universities flouted ZIMCHE's QA guidelines in universities (U7; U4) due to demands of circumstances. It seemed that there was tension between a need for responsiveness and demands for central control through ZIMCHE as the QA body. There was therefore a tension between ZIMCHE attempting to assert its authority to control quality in universities and universities eager to maintain autonomy to direct their institutions in the directions they saw fit. Universities seemed eager to 'try new things defined by themselves and not by external drivers' (Hodgson, 2008:23). Thus some universities considered their unique situations in which they existed and thus increased enrolments in response to their circumstances.

ZIMCHE's control mechanism of quality in HE extended to the type and even the standard measurements of student accommodation universities had to offer to their students. Again the policy seemed to be at variance with the reality on the ground regarding the capability of universities to provide student accommodation. In universities where students were provided with accommodation, they were crammed in the student halls in most universities (U2; U5). Another response to this reality was that most students lodged in nearby neighbourhoods as universities lacked the capacity to accommodate students while enrolment still rose (Z1). *The Standard* (2014) newspaper reported that, as Midlands State University battled with student accommodation, the crisis had seen up to eight students sharing a single room in the Gweru town's high-density suburbs. *The Zimbabwe Independent* (2014) newspaper also reported that 38 university students shared a four-bedroomed house in Harare's Mt Pleasant suburb, something which posed health risks and psychological problems due to overcrowding. All these showed the extent to which ZIMCHE's policy on accommodation was a challenge to implement and that simply demanding its implementation did not assist in attending to the problem.

8.3 Discourse of 'gold standard'

There seemed to be a discourse of 'gold standard' in the data, which reflected quality as a generic gold standard. It was a discourse in which contextual factors were disregarded.

The set qualifications target appeared to be an overambitious one as there is a critical shortage of qualified staff throughout universities in SADC due to poor working conditions (Manyukwe, 2008) and the fact that the region is battling to stem the flight of highly-skilled professionals to developed countries (SADC, 2010). The ZIMCHE targets were seen to suggest that they were out of touch with the reality within the universities. There was a sense in the data, aligned to the literature, that there was a fall of trust in the academe (Trow, 1994) while this has also been interpreted as the decline of academic power (Clark, 1983). Perhaps it was in response to this that participants expressed sentiments such as 'universities could do better without ZIMCHE, we don't need it' (UC1).

While ZIMCHE expected that all universities had to meet the prescribed ideal of staff qualifications regardless of their positions in time and place, it seemed that this provided evidence that ZIMCHE was working from a discourse of generic 'gold standard' that failed to take context into account. For various reasons the objective was largely unachievable and overambitious. ZIMCHE expected lecturers to attain PhD by 2017 but without any funding or scholarships for the affected lecturers, who also received meagre salaries in a poorly performing economy (U8). That made self-financing in any further studies almost impossible. Lecturers who were already teaching in the universities wondered how they were going to further their education due to budget constraints (U6; U7).

The Herald (2015) noted that HEIs in Zimbabwe had struggled to recruit and retain qualified academics. In fact, most Zimbabwean academics that attained higher qualifications had migrated to South Africa and other foreign countries (Masengwe & Machingura, 2012) where there were improved working conditions, with poor working conditions being some of the push factors for academics to enter the diaspora from Zimbabwe (Shizha and Kariwo, 2011). For instance, on 21 June 2016 representatives from all State universities demanded their outstanding salaries that the Government had failed to pay for months including the 2015 bonuses (Mushava, 2016). On a wider spectrum, there was a critical shortage of qualified academic staff throughout the SADC region due to poor working conditions (Manyukwe, 2008), and the region battled to stem the flight of highly-skilled professionals to the developed countries (SADC, 2010). Even in South Africa, which was one of their destination countries, it could also be

unrealistic to achieve such a target of PhD holders as only 36% of academics in HE had PhDs there (Mohamedbhai, 2011). Therefore, ZIMCHE's premium discourse of quality was problematic as far as qualified academics were concerned. It would seem that ZIMCHE understood quality as something generic and neutral and devoid of context. Its policies did not engage with the realities in which the universities functioned. This was in tension to a 'fit for purpose' discourse which took context more fully into account.

Taking into account ZIMCHE's cut-off dates for attainment of higher qualifications for lecturers, such a control mechanism of the recruitment of university staff had the potential to lead to a collision course with universities. Universities were also guided by their own Acts or Charters that made up the basis of their formations. These had not been harmonised with the ZIMCHE Act and could therefore be referenced to in university actions. For example, the Bindura University of Science Education Act (2002) empowered the university to make its own staff appointments.

ZIMCHE seemed to have a generic international excellence and global gold standard notion of best practice in QA regarding staff qualifications. Admittedly university staff have to be qualified and capable of directing the institution towards the achievement of set goals (Askling & Stensaker, 2002), but the Zimbabwean context did not have adequate qualified staff (Z3; U2; U5; U6) for such targets to be realistic. A lack of qualified academics (as discussed in Chapter 2) was the reason many programmes at HEIs such as University of Zimbabwe were forced to close. Instead of tying policy on staff recruitment to the reality on the ground in terms of resources, context and capacity, ZIMCHE seemed to have been conflicted between a discourse of excellence and the Zimbabwean context, and many participants experienced this as requiring compliance.

Another area in which participants indicated that they simply had to comply with ZIMCHE was in relation to institutional accreditation. Through the ZIMCHE Act, ZIMCHE oversaw the applications for establishment of all universities in Zimbabwe and had the mandate to register and accredit institutions of HE (Bukaliya & Rupande, 2013). Therefore all universities needed to be accredited by ZIMCHE, such accreditation confirming that they met certain basic standards with a review carried out every five years (Doc 3). ZIMCHE was established at a time when there were concerns about the proliferation of institutions, as discussed in Chapter 1. Controlling the mushrooming of HEIs, some of which may only be 'degree mills' (*The Herald*, 2015), was a key concern underpinning the formation of ZIMCHE. In his interview,

Z2 observed that 'one of the reasons why ZIMCHE was formed was to control many small institutions that were being formed just to make money'. It was recognised that in such a context where HEIs were appearing overnight there was a need for control, as this had the potential of discrediting the whole HE system (Docs 5 & 7), especially when such HEIs could just be set up without adequate requirements ensuring quality of HE, be it financial, material or human resources. 'I can also mention that before we started there were so many fly by night institutions in town' (Z1).

ZIMCHE's policy in QA regarding accreditation and auditing involved the use of checklists which universities had to comply with (Docs 6, 7 & 8). Although ZIMCHE's checklist approach could determine whether quality specifications were met in its accreditation and audit processes, it was experienced by some participants as a very negative approach that promoted a superficial compliance approach rather than a deep engagement (U2). This approach is very widely critiqued in the literature for leading to fairly superficial analysis, because the kinds of things that can be ticked off on a checklist are generally fairly simple, whereas quality is a very nuanced issue. A checklist approach is arguably over-simplistic and over-generalised and inadequate for conferring the rigour of each complex and unique university (Andrews, 2008). The literature goes so far as to suggest that the use of checklists illustrates a failure to understand and address the complex challenges individual institutions face, and hence fails to reveal qualitative differences of HEIs (Catchpole & Russ, 2015).

The power of ZIMCHE to close down institutions failing to comply with its minimum standards included their authority to close or restrict particular programmes within universities. For example, ZIMCHE stopped the Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University from enrolling law students because the establishment of the law degree had not yet been approved by ZIMCHE (Gumbo, 2016) and also 'stopped three programmes from one of the public institutions' (Z1). The power that ZIMCHE was given to control offerings and accreditation through the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education Act (2006) to play its statutory control role in QA in universities was thus enacted in very clear ways.

However, the way QA was constructed in policy in Zimbabwe had challenges in implementation (*The Herald*, 2014), including in ensuring that HEIs adhered to their mandates. The context therefore made ZIMCHE's policy a 'gold standard' one since the economic quagmire that had bedevilled Zimbabwe for some time had contributed to failure of institutions to stick to their original mandates. For instance, one university could not continue enrolling

students for the Sciences for which they were established since their student catchment area had dwindled (U4). They therefore began to focus on offering Arts degrees. Another university that was established to enrol only Education degrees had diversified into offering Commerce courses (U5) in order to survive financially since such programmes attracted more paying students. *The Herald* (2015) reported that in Zimbabwe some universities deviated from their mandates because of underlying push factors such as opting for Commerce subjects which had the potential to attract more students. On March, 3 2015, the Chief Executive Officer of ZIMCHE therefore gave a presentation to the Portfolio Committee on Higher Education, Science and Technology Development and raised concerns about deviations from institutional mandates. In the same presentation, the CEO acknowledged that some universities disregarded their mandates as they had to raise money to survive (*The Herald*, 2015). The other problem was that universities that needed some amendments to their mandates had to apply through ZIMCHE, which forwarded the application to the Minister of HE, who eventually forwarded the application to the President for consideration (ZIMCHE, 2006). Effectively, universities were expected to undergo a long process to make any amendments to their Acts or Charters. The data suggests that those that deviated from their mandates without following due process attempted to avoid the bureaucratic processes.

Changes to universities' primary objectives of their formations pointed to the contextual challenges that prevailed. The Zimbabwean context was nuanced and complex. It made it difficult to work with the understanding that 'rules are rules' and had to be followed regardless of the university's circumstances. Much of the avoidance of due process could be in response to an underlying 'bureaucratic inflexibility' which failed to take contextual circumstances and constraints into account. Universities' circumstances had changed since the original decisions, however, the universities no longer had the autonomy to simply change direction in rapid response to their shifting contexts. Thus, in reaction to the discourse of control, some universities ended up invoking the discourse of resistance (U3; U4; U7). Here participants indicated that their response to the sense of being controlled and having their institutional autonomy undermined was to ignore or challenge ZIMCHE wherever they could. The context therefore presented potential for a power conflict as ZIMCHE attempted to exercise its authority while universities attempted to exercise their autonomy.

Establishing QA units in universities had its own 'gold standard' dimension that some participants observed. Z1 and U2 asserted that to some universities the QA units were seen as

being an imported concept and a ZIMCHE requirement, making them unacceptable. One academic remarked that he 'did not understand the ZIMCHE's concept of QA units at all' (U3). Others indicated that they did not know what these units did even after they had formed them in their universities (U1; U6). Such an opinion was despite the fact that the participants were members of QA units. While the idea of QA units could have been an alternative approach to QA, their establishment was perceived to lack internal university consultation as some participants indicated that they were not consulted before their formation. 'ZIMCHE just give orders without involving universities so much' (U3). Furthermore, some universities followed ZIMCHE policy in establishing the QA units but then failed to capacitate the staff within such units with any training QA (U2; U7).

Z4 and U6 explained that, since the staff in the university QA units liaised directly with ZIMCHE as a way of controlling quality, there was a conflict as the QA units, though internal to the universities, were soon discursively constructed in many of the same ways as ZIMCHE itself – as being bodies of control to which individuals and departments could respond by drawing on discourses of compliance or resistance – or a combination of both. There was thus ample evidence in the data that various ZIMCHE ideas, such as the establishment of internal QA units, could therefore be resisted or alternatively implemented without commitment to its success. To the Zimbabwean HE context, it appeared establishment of QA units was one of the global trends which was out of touch with the reality of capacity and resources. To some extent, it seemed as if quality was supposed to be assured through uncritical mimicking of patterns and structures used elsewhere without careful interrogation of the Zimbabwean context, especially in regards to funding, and without due cognisance of the dominant discourses.

Although ZIMCHE controlled student enrolment in universities, other contextual elements that dictated universities' actions impacted on student enrolment and ZIMCHE did not seem to take these sufficiently into account, according to the participants. The context had forced some universities to digress from their primary plans. Universities received inadequate funding from the State (Z1; Z3; U1) and that was one of the reasons why one university, that had been established to cater for an enrolment of just ten thousand students, had ended up with a figure that had ballooned to twenty-two thousand to raise more money (Z1). Circumstances had therefore caused ZIMCHE to face challenges in controlling enrolment patterns. It seemed universities made autonomous decisions through adjusting to the contextual demands regardless of ZIMCHE requirements. Some universities flouted ZIMCHE's QA guidelines in

universities (U7; U4) due to demands of circumstances. It seemed that there was tension between the need for responsiveness and demands for central control through ZIMCHE as the QA body. There was therefore a tension between ZIMCHE attempting to assert its authority to control quality in universities and universities eager to maintain autonomy to steer their institutions in the directions they saw fit. Universities seemed eager to 'try new things defined by themselves and not by external drivers' (Hodgson, 2008:23). Thus some universities considered their unique situations in which they existed and then increased enrolments in response to their circumstances.

In an attempt to show which of ZIMCHE's expectations showed a discourse of 'gold standard' as it attempted to control the quality of infrastructure in universities, *The Herald* of October 26, 2015 reported that Great Zimbabwe University's council chairman, Simplicius Chihambakwe, revealed that lack of funds had stopped the institution's migration to its official site near the historic Great Zimbabwe monument. Instead, the GZU was housed at the Masvingo Teachers' College premises. That meant fitting into the teachers' college that was constructed for trainee teachers. Some universities had resorted to renting buildings as a way of augmenting existing classroom space (U2). Other HEIs like Midlands State University had embarked on establishing additional rented campuses but were still plagued by crowded learning spaces (Bukaliya & Rupande, 2013). GZU had 'resorted to the multi-campus system, renting several small buildings as campuses that were dotted in and around the town, as well as spilling over to the mining town of Mashava, about 40km away' and 'that negatively impacted on the QA of HE while academics and students missed some lectures as they travelled to distant campuses' (Z3). These contextual constraints were clearly problematic in terms of quality, but the general view among participants was that it was unhelpful to have an external quality assurance body simply setting desirable best practice standards with little regard to the contexts in which universities were having to operate.

ZIMCHE's policy on QA also had a number of seemingly generic requirements regarding adequate learning materials in universities, which included well-stocked library facilities (Docs 6 & 7). The control of such resources was driven by the philosophy that adequate and modern library facilities constitute some of the most important learning resources in the university as there must be sufficient texts and electronic search facilities to cover the needs of existing programmes and numbers of staff and students (Doc 8). Such best practices are undoubtedly crucial for the attainment or maintenance of quality as students and staff need library facilities

if they are to undertake serious academic endeavours (de Jager & Gbadamosi, 2010). However, in the Zimbabwean context, such policy positions remained largely theoretical with great challenges in their implementation. Due to inadequate state funding, university libraries had suffered significantly (Chidindi, 2012). He observes that library facilities had failed to match the rapid expansion of HEIs. ZIMCHE stressed that, in addition to traditional library systems with hard copies of texts, universities had to have access to online libraries as a complementary resource (Doc 7). This was again difficult to implement as accessing the online libraries was hampered by electricity outages (Chidindi, 2012) and by enormous charges for databases. ZIMCHE had crafted best practice policies regarding library facilities but clearly universities had challenges in implementing policy. The discourses about quality as a generic 'gold standard' failed to take into account contextual needs and the challenges which universities encountered to put the policy regarding the library facilities into practice.

As ZIMCHE's policy to enhance quality in HE, it also set standards regarding what constituted adequate computers in universities (Doc 6). ZIMCHE emphasised the use of technologically-based teaching in HE (Doc 5) and indicated that this was the mode whereby higher education would be made of an excellent quality. While 'technology-based modes of teaching and learning are becoming the new norm for HE worldwide' (Ewell, 2010:174), it seemed their effectiveness and benefits in a Zimbabwean context were not considered in a contextual way. There were numerous variables that influenced the universities' implementation of ZIMCHE policy on ICTs. It seemed ZIMCHE was tempted to lean toward an unquestioned 'gold standard' excellence discourse of quality, rather than tackle what might be desirable regarding ICT use within the contextual realities of the institutions. One participant pointed out that if universities faced challenges to provide the basic infrastructure such as classrooms, then provisions of ICTs were luxuries which universities would find difficult to provide (U4). U3 remarked, 'Computers? What a joke. We can't afford to buy for our students as of now'.

There was agreement among the participants that such provision was central to good quality education as 'students and staff needed to have the knowledge to extract the required information' (U6). In their research study on distance learning in Zimbabwe, Bukaliya and Rupande (2013) found that staff and students in the universities in Zimbabwe lacked competence in the use of ICTs and, even in universities where ICTs could have been procured, it was difficult to exploit their benefits as electricity power cuts were so severe with many parts of the country suffering up to eighteen hour blackouts (*The Herald*, 2016). There is a broad

understanding internationally that computer access and access to research databases are fundamental minimum requirements for a university, and so participants were hard pressed to argue against the ZIMCHE requirements. But they felt that simply setting such requirements without acknowledgement of the realities was problematic and unfair on the universities, which were then doomed to fail (U3; U4; U6).

Another policy discussed in the data which demonstrates the discourses of quality as a 'gold standard' was ZIMCHE's control of infrastructure for students with disabilities. The QA body advocated for explicit attention to the needs of students with disabilities, who are regularly neglected in the HE system. ZIMCHE advocated for a user-friendly environment for all students with disabilities including the physically-challenged students who were to be catered for (Doc 9). ZIMCHE was therefore concerned that universities should address barriers to learning and promote institutional access for all students including those with disabilities. Universities were therefore expected to be welcoming, appropriate and conducive for all students. Specifically, ZIMCHE emphasised that university buildings must be designed for access by people with disabilities. This discourse of non-discrimination and equity is impossible to argue against and is clearly a public good which potentially created opportunities and mitigated obstacles that students with disabilities faced in accessing the universities. Furthermore, such requirements to create an enabling environment with 'reasonable accommodations' for students with disabilities is in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to which Zimbabwe was a signatory.

Despite the policy on students with disabilities being in place, the contextual realities were that most HE institutional buildings had been constructed a long time ago and had not been upgraded to accommodate people with disabilities (U3; U8) due to lack of funds. Clearly-available data showed that students with disabilities had indeed experienced some discrimination and exclusion effected by institutional structures that worked to the benefit of students without disabilities. Thus, crucial elements such as elevators in some universities, among other requirements for wheelchair users to access multi-storey buildings, were non-existent (U1).

Although ZIMCHE's inclusive policy took into consideration the minority, i.e. students with disabilities, the reality was that some universities in Zimbabwe faced significant challenges to implement the policy. As discussed, most universities struggled to provide basic building structures such as classrooms due to budgetary constraints. Making adjustments to old buildings to ensure user-friendly conditions for students with disabilities seemed to be out of reach when

providing the basics was a challenge. Therefore, while policy for students with disabilities was in place, it was evident that universities had limited resource support mechanisms to cater for the disabled. In the case of the Zimbabwean HE context, it seemed ZIMCHE adopted a discourse of inclusion in line with international thinking and human rights, yet the policy disregarded the context for implementation.

8.4 Conclusion

This chapter focuses on ZIMCHE's policy issues in QA. ZIMCHE policy issues were numerous and were constructed through various discourses in the data. In this chapter I have only addressed those two that seemed to be dominant and re-occur numerous times. It seems that ZIMCHE has in place several policies that aim at advancing QA in HE. However, as much of the discussion and analysis of policies in this chapter points out, it seems that the policy implementation has been held up by lack of resource support. ZIMCHE operated in a context that was in an economic quagmire which had dogged the country for many years. ZIMCHE policy positions seemed based on international best practices in an attempt to restore public confidence in the HE system that a certain level of quality had been achieved (Kristoffersen, Sursock, & Westerheijden, 1998). This is a typical discourse of quality as perfection in which universities are expected to conform to particular predefined and measurable specifications (Harvey & Green, 1993). Clearly, in the Zimbabwean context this emerged as a policy versus context struggle. There was a discourse of compliance whereby some institutions and academics simply observed the letter of the law, without engaging in meaningful quality enhancement. There was a discourse of control in which ZIMCHE was seen to be reducing institutional autonomy in its activities. Embedded in the two discourses was a discourse of generic 'gold standard' in which the standards set by ZIMCHE were experienced as being unrealistic in the face of the Zimbabwean context. This chapter has focused on these two discourses, which are fairly negative in terms of perceptions of ZIMCHE's role. It should of course be noted that there was also data from academics indicating that the uneven quality of the Zimbabwean system made a strong oversight body essential and that were fully supportive of ZIMCHE's role in ensuring quality.

Chapter 9

Conclusion

9.1 Introduction

In this chapter I reflect on the major findings and conclusions of the study and outline some of the more significant aspects. Concern about the quality of higher education has been one driver of the quality assurance movement. Other drivers include an increased concern with efficiency, the incursion of managerialism in our universities, and the demand for universities to directly support economic growth. A wealth of literature is available which researches the causes and effects of QA processes worldwide, though little of it emerges from the African continent. This research study therefore provides a contribution to our understanding of quality assurance in higher education, with a particular reference to how it plays out in Zimbabwe.

9.2 Research focus

This study looked at the discourses that constructed quality assurance in higher education through ZIMCHE. The main research question that the study addressed was:

- ✓ What are the discourses that construct ZIMCHE's role and quality assurance processes?

The study had sub-questions that were stated as follows:

- ✓ How is quality assurance constructed in the national policy and other pertinent documentation?
- ✓ How has ZIMCHE implemented quality assurance as a series of events?
- ✓ How has ZIMCHE experienced these events?
- ✓ How have university academics experienced these events?

The identification of discourses was important, as Fairclough (2005) posits that discourses are more than just the words people choose to use: they indicate beliefs and values and because of this discourses are structures with powers or tendencies (Fairclough 2005). Thus, drawing on critical realism, I have argued that discourses are understood to be mechanisms which have effect – they contain emergent powers over what is possible to say and do (Kress, 1989) which have causal efficacy and effect on what happens in the domains of events and experiences. While this study did not claim that discourses are by any means the only mechanisms that have

such causal effects, as there are multiple other non-discursive mechanisms, it does argue that they are significant in what happens in the world and how these are understood. Indeed, discourses are seen to intersect with all other mechanisms and constrain and enable events and experiences in the world. And while they are but one mechanism, their power in showing how the social world is understood, in this case quality assurance, is significant.

Because the thesis as a whole identified the discourses that constructed ZIMCHE's role in quality assurance processes, I begin this chapter with a brief re-examination of the key discourses and their significance. While this chapter addresses this study's contributions to the field of quality assurance in higher education in Zimbabwe, it also considers how this study adds to our understanding of quality assurance issues in universities more broadly around the world.

9.3 Contribution and significance of study to research in higher education

This thesis identifies a number of sometimes conflicting discourses that can be put into four groups namely: a) multiplicity of discourses of how quality is conceptualised including standards, autonomy, contempt and resistance, compliance, sustenance, confidence, and culture; b) 'gold standard' discourses that denote excellence or best practice in some generic way; c) relationship discourses which include fear, resistance, control, contempt, autonomy, sustenance, and confidence; and d) discourses of quality in policy regarding quality assurance which include compliance and control. These often contradictory discourses were at times drawn on by the same people and there is thus little agreement about how quality assurance should be conceptualised. Furthermore, it should be noted that the data included a number of discourses and I attempt here to just draw out the dominant ones.

9.3.1 Multiplicity of discourses of quality

One of the major findings of this study regarded how study participants conceptualised quality. There was evidence of a multiplicity of discourses of quality among study participants. It was imperative to look into these conceptualisations as 'the way we think and talk about a subject influences and reflects the ways we act in relation to that subject' (Karlberg, 2005:1). Hence, the various discourses potentially have an impact on approaches to quality assurance. These are causal powers that can affect what events and experiences emerge in the world of higher education.

It is important that I indicate that in the data from study participants were examples of all of Harvey and Green's (1993) identified conceptualisations of quality. Some conceptualised quality as being about 'standards', seeing discourses as measures or criteria through which quality can be judged (Barnett, 1994). The problem with this discourse in the world of higher education is that different universities have 'different missions and contexts, and … bias attached to the choice and weightings of indicators' (Hazelkorn, 2009:13). This means suitability of standards as proxies of quality can become problematic, especially if not overtly grappled with. In addition to the controversy of what counts as appropriate standards, which is a matter often left uncontested, is the issue of what criteria can be used to measure the value of these standards and who the individual or group might be who defines and sets the standards. It means implementing a common system to measure all HEIs may also become a potential problem.

There were participants who indicated that discourse of quality was that of 'perfection' or 'consistency'. These embraced a discourse of quality as the idea of 'zero error' where quality exists as a discourse of flawless outcome (Harvey, 1995). Such participants had the concept of quality of the industrial sector, where the aim is to produce standardised, 'free of defects' products (Watty, 2003). The problem with this discourse in higher education is that 'it is not the aim of the university to produce identical graduates' (Parri, 2006:107). In industry, products do not make choices about how they will be shaped, but students in university do choose and are important stakeholders (Albanese, 2000).

Other participants perceived the discourse of quality as 'fitness of purpose'. These participants emphasised the purposes of individual universities as they took into consideration the 'diversity of institutions… having different missions and subject focuses ...' (Harvey, 2002:14). Furthermore, such participants emphasised the need for individual universities to fulfil their clearly-stated missions or their purposes while they have to be efficient and effective in meeting the goals which they set for themselves (Harvey & Green, 1993). The problem with this discourse of quality is that some universities 'tend to have goals that are rather unclear and sometimes contradictory, with poorly understood systems to achieve them' (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2005:75). This was certainly the case in this study.

There were also some study participants who conceptualised discourse of quality as 'value for money'. This was not surprising, as the notion of accountability is central to this discourse in the world of higher education, and issues of finances were paramount throughout the study.

Harvey (2009) stresses the need to account for and prioritise public expenditure, and hence the pressure to ensure value for both private and public monies. Johnstone (2003:4) suggests that 'those who benefit should at least share in the costs'. The problem with the discourse of value for money is that it conveys the message that such value needs to be measurable, and declared acceptable or unacceptable (American Society for Quality, 2007), and yet the value can be through returns from the investment during the post-graduate period and earnings as well as new knowledge students attain during study and the transformative effect of higher education, a discourse that I also found in the data. This discourse takes a particularly sharp edge given the dire financial constraints in Zimbabwe, coupled with the enormous unemployment where having a degree is no guarantee of employment.

Other participants conceptualised discourse of quality as 'transformation'. These were participants that saw quality as a process of qualitative change, which in higher education adds value to students through their learning (Harvey, 1999). While this discourse was not particularly strong in the data, it is a common conception in the literature, which emphasises 'the enhancement and empowerment of students as participants in process of learning' and 'even more than that, higher education is about participation in a process of learning for transformation' (Harvey, 1996:2). Thus students are the central stakeholders as their experiences in the university are crucial in their own transformation and their capability to transform society. In addition to that the purpose of universities includes the requirement 'to develop the talents of its students to their maximum potential' (Dill & Beerkens, 2010).

The existence of various discourses of quality in higher education in the data showed how different discourses can co-exist in harmony or in tension with each other. This of course then has implications for how processes of quality assurance are conceptualised.

9.3.2 The 'gold standard' discourse

This research study found that there was a strong set of discourses which conceptualised quality assurance as being the measure of 'gold standard' and best practice. These were often what I have termed decontextualised discourses in that they took quality assurance as being a generic process implemented uniformly all around the world. The discourses took the notion of quality and the processes of quality assurance to be rigidly set regardless of the circumstances in terms of resource constraints and regardless of what any particular universities strove to do. Such

discourses disregarded the political context, and the national culture and histories of the institutions.

While the study focused on Zimbabwe, such discourses are an international phenomenon not unique to Zimbabwe. Such discourses portray quality assurance as if it is a widely shared set of underpinning values across varied national expectations. The discourses send a message that there is a set of standards, procedures and guidelines that are applicable in every context. They are also discourses that portray similar 'good' practice in relation to quality and its assurance through every quality assurance agent that is formed across the world. The generic quality assurance practices imply that there are minimum standards that are regarded as simply uncontestably applicable in every higher education context worldwide.

I have argued that there are a number of implications for such a discursive construction of quality assurance in higher education. While the discourses of 'gold standard' and best practice imply that there is consent that quality assurance is generic all around the world, the study data has challenged that idea. There is a clear need for quality assurance processes to be premised on the context in which they take place. It has been argued that quality assurance is in fact a very nuanced concept and therefore has to take into account the context in which the quality is being assured. It has to take account of issues such as resources and the extent to which universities are able to simply meet the required minimum standards. It has been highlighted that even the minimum set standards have to be reasonable and achievable, rather than adopting the internationally set standards. This study has shown that what has been documented as the basis approach to quality assurance cannot just be adopted and implemented unquestioningly. If quality assurance is to be a truly developmental process, it needs to respond to the context and assist universities in enhancing quality within such contexts. If the generic gold standards are entirely at odds with the reality on the ground, then it seems unlikely that the processes will have much effect on problematic quality. The study clearly indicated that there are indeed problems of quality in many universities, but because the external quality assurance processes are seen to be unrealistic, they are not proving to be the powerful quality enhancement levers that they could be.

Quality assurance also has to take into account what is being done within the context in order to ensure that universities perform their proper and expected roles in the country. Thus minimum expectations of quality assurance agencies have to suit the context in which universities have to function. They have to look at quality assurance as an activity of purpose

so as to question the role that the existing universities are serving. There was little to no data that contextualised what the role of the university in the current Zimbabwean context might be, what its constraints and enablements were and how quality might be assured in this context. Thus it was that the data spoke to quality and quality assurance processes in broadly generic ways with scant regard for how a university might contribute in a failing economy or in a country with massive unemployment, and indeed in universities that were severely under-resourced.

There is the idea of universities being diverse and needing to attend to different goals. This needs to be taken into account in ways that did not seem to be the case in this study. It is therefore crucial that institutional differences in mission and type (Barnett, 1992) be considered when quality assuring higher education in universities. This study therefore showed that, while most national governments around the world may have deliberately established quality assurance agencies to regulate quality in universities, a one size fits all approach has little effect.

This 'gold standard' discourse brought about the use of generic standards in assuring quality in universities as it seemed to be the case in this study. Despite supposed valuing of institutional diversity this generic quality assurance approach emphasised conformity to set standards which had the potential of subjecting universities to institutional comparisons. That potentially causes loss of lens through which the quality is assured in diverse universities with different missions and educational focuses.

Furthermore, the use of predefined and measurable specifications in the form of standards in quality assurance revealed too much attention paid to quantitative rather than qualitative data. This implied a 'no defects' (Harvey & Green, 1993) approach to quality assurance, which is largely inapplicable to the higher education sector (Watty, 2003) as the complexities of higher education and the social interactions of teaching and learning of necessity include defects, errors and, hopefully, ongoing improvements. The use of similar standards across institutions, without a nuanced reflection on the country's context or the institution's position, was a 'gold standard' discourse which lost focus on other imperatives such as 'developing students' critical reflective ability (Harvey, 2006:14) or responding to the multiple social constraints in which universities were expected to function. The dominance of the 'audit culture' (Strathern, 2000) was most apparent in the study in that notions of 'gold standard' were imported with little critique or consideration for what they might mean in the Zimbabwean context.

9.3.3 Relationship discourses

The study also identified a number of discourses that suggested a schism between ZIMCHE and universities. First was the discourse of autonomy in which there seemed to be a struggle as ZIMCHE attempted to exert its power in universities as a quality assurance body: this was experienced by some academic participants as a strong attack on the discourses of institutional autonomy and academic freedom. Some study participants indicated that there was a high degree of impingement, interference and constraining through external quality assurance of higher education in universities. Where these discourses characterised the stakeholders of higher education, universities and ZIMCHE as the quality assurance body, the impact was that the relationship seemed to be marked by non-cooperation. Inevitably, contempt emanates, which was another discourse that was evident in the data as some participants indicated that they at times simply ignored or undermined the quality assurance body's directives. The issue of resistance to external quality assurance processes, evident in some of the data in this study, is also abundantly reported on in the literature. If academics respond to quality assurance measures with resistance, then there is little space for it to be a vehicle for enhancement of quality. Enhancement relies on a level of trust and shared concern between the quality assurance agency and the universities (Salmi & Bassett, 2014).

It was evident in the data that, in some cases, instead of academics showing contempt and subsequently resistance to external quality assurance, a discourse of fear emerged. Some discussants in the study indicated that they were at times afraid of ZIMCHE. The impact of this discourse of fear is the potential it has for universities to just elicit a superficial and uncritical compliance-level response to external quality assurance demands. Fears of this kind may diminish success in self-critical analysis of the possible strategies to improve HE (Coltart, 2009). Due to fear, universities end up just complying, without investing time and effort to develop quality infrastructures, in order to satisfy the quality assurance body. Thus, from a Critical realist perspective, people with power may draw on one discursive construction of quality to develop processes while other groups of people who have less power, but who may be called upon to comply with the processes, might be drawing on very different discourses. Given the relationship between the state and the university, and the sometimes unclear relationship between the state and ZIMCHE, it seemed difficult for this discourse to be overcome and replaced with the necessary notions of shared endeavour in a joint project.

In the data was also a discourse that I called a discourse of sustenance in which external quality assurance is financially sustained mainly by universities due to inadequate government funding mechanisms in the face of extreme austerity. The broad 'university pays' model was shown in this research to have the potential to compromise the external quality assurance body's ability to make independent decisions. When universities resented financing the quality assurance body, there was a suggestion in this study that its role potentially became compromised.

Among the discourses that characterised relationships between universities and ZIMCHE, some study participants indicated that there was a high degree of confidence in the processes. A major finding that contributed to the development of confidence between universities and quality assurance agencies was the establishment of strong internal quality assurance mechanisms through quality assurance units in universities. This is an international trend, as institutional quality assurance units have been found to transform a university and raise quality levels (Materu, 2007), often with a greater degree of success than external processes. The emphasis on the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance system, and the development of a quality culture through the establishment of internal quality assurance units in universities, has the potential to become a tool for major transformation in the higher education sector (Fairclough, 2005) through increased self-understanding (Stahl, 2013). However, 'the transformative notion of quality presupposes a fundamental purpose of higher education' (Harvey & Knight, 1996:15–16), and so it would be essential that these universities should expend time to ensure a shared vision with all stakeholders.

Through quality assurance units, there is potentially an opportunity for universities to adjust to changes in the immediate environment of the institution at an appropriate time. Provided there is a level of mutual trust and shared engagement, whenever performance is found to be unsatisfactory at unit level, the situation can be rectified far more quickly than might be achieved by an external body. When quality is developed in such a collegial process, there are potential fundamental shifts of mind individually and collectively as stakeholders are focused on the level of quality they desire in their higher education institution (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2005). Thus there may be the potential to provide an opportunity to nominate evaluators from within the institution who are dedicated and understand the university culture in order to provide more sophisticated and nuanced accounts of quality and more realistic recommendations for enhancement.

Another impact of the worldwide trend of internal quality assurance mechanisms through institutional quality assurance units is the development of a quality culture in which 'there is no need to check final output' (Harvey & Green, 2006:16). Thus quality becomes a habit which is seen to have merit in its own right and is not conceived of as an act or practice aimed at critical improvement (Colapietro, 2005). Institutional quality assurance units might be more likely to ensure that universities put in place their own mechanisms and create more realistic pictures of how they change in terms of quality assurance activities thereby potentially bringing about positive effects (Kleijnen, Dolmans, Willems & van Hout, 2011). That means universities have more opportunities to review themselves at institutional level as they get the chance to know their strengths and weaknesses by looking at themselves in a 'mirror'. Quality assurance units potentially enable self-criticism and reflection on their institutional missions and objectives, unlike when QA is solely enforced from the outside (Wynia & Kurlander, 2007), especially in a generic manner.

Furthermore, the implication of internal quality assurance units is that there is a working relationship between universities and quality assurance agencies as colleagues, as data in this study revealed is possible, though far from automatic. Such relationships help in the creation of an atmosphere that enables approaching QA issues as partners. It also enhances the feeling of proprietorship of quality assurance processes. There is the also a potential for the development of confidence, which also enables the stakeholders involved to create more realistic pictures of how they can change in terms of quality assurance activities.

Though the critical role that internal quality assurance can play is partly to ensure institutional growth in terms of quality of higher education, it is important that those internal processes are validated by any external quality assurance agency (Grifoll, Leiber, Moldt, Rasmussen & Sørensen, 2013). This process can ensure a coherent response to quality enhancement while constraining the extent to which quality assurance agencies are simply arms of government. Such findings about the need for strong relationships of transparency and trust address the need for an improved relationship between ZIMCHE and the universities, and thereby raise questions about the relationship between universities, quality assurance bodies and the State more broadly.

9.3.4 Discourses of policy in quality assurance

There were discourses identified in the data that related to policy and policy implementation on quality assurance through ZIMCHE in higher education. First was the discourse of compliance, where universities simply followed ZIMCHE's quality assurance processes to the 'letter of the law' without really engaging with them. Quality assurance agencies' expectance of universities to comply with their quality assurance processes is a common characteristic the world over. This aligns with the contention in the literature that external quality assurance bodies usually impose their own version of quality on the universities to be implemented (Dill, 1992b; Dill, Massy, Williams & Cook, 1996). In the process of enacting compliance with the regulations as best as they are able, an opportunity for real engagement with notions of the university's purpose and context is lost. Considerations of what quality enhancement might entail are set aside as institutions follow requirements in a checklist type fashion.

Secondly, closely related to the discourse of compliance was the discourse of control in which ZIMCHE attempted to influence how universities functioned. It was revealed by some study participants that ZIMCHE's emphasis on control in its quality assurance processes was underpinned by its two-pronged objective of exercising both policing and monitoring in the provision of higher education. The significance of this all around the world is evidenced in a large body of literature that speaks about how many universities perceive the roles of quality assurance agencies as relating to policing and monitoring. The central role of quality assurance agencies is understood to be the enforcement of quality assurance systems on universities without compromise. Thus, external quality assurance agencies' interests are arguably invested in control so as to ensure the status and legitimacy of higher education of a country while enhancing national and international reputation (Shizha and Kariwo, 2011), although these are at times interpreted as being an infringement on institutional autonomy.

Just like the discourse of compliance, the impact of control of quality assurance agencies is an increasing lack of institutional responsibility for quality. That potentially encourages a culture of compliance in which quality assurance bodies' expectations through quality monitoring, or their preferences or policies, are being acknowledged or implemented (Harvey, 2006). There was an implication in the data that one of the objectives of the control is in order to protect the interests of the established quality assurance agencies.

Institutions of higher learning invest time and effort on developing quality infrastructures to satisfy quality assurance bodies and this is arguably at the expense of active efforts to assure

and improve institutional quality (Dill, 2007). The world over, and not just in Zimbabwe, one of the challenges in quality assurance has been the ability to find the right balance between control and allowing universities to exercise sufficient space through autonomy (Salmi & Bassett, 2014). Universities therefore expect to exercise their autonomy with minimum external regulation or evaluation.

Because of the political context in Zimbabwe it perhaps takes a sharp edge and thus this sort of relationship between state, quality assurance agency and universities is especially charged. The context of Zimbabwe was a unique one in its form, characterised by economic difficulties. For instance, the discourse of sustenance potentially raised the discourse of value for money, with additional stress put on the need to account for and prioritise public expenditure (Harvey, 2009). There is need for accountability as a 'demonstration by institutions, to the state and to broader society, that they have used public money for the effective achievement of public policy goals' (CHE, 2005:7). With diminished resources for the HE sector from the government or the taxpayer (Davidson, 2012), there is a heightened need to know if their funds are being spent in a correct and efficient manner. Thus they demand public accountability from universities through their performance. The context therefore executes more pressure to ensure value for both private and public monies. Such requirements exist in any part of the world, and are not peculiar to any specific country, though naturally take a specific form in Zimbabwe. There is a need to recognise that one of the external quality assurance agencies' role in external quality assurance is essentially a matter of 'consumer protection'. There is also a need to be accountable to students, who would expect value for their money.

Quality Assurance in many African countries needs to take the issue of the relationship between universities and the state more explicitly into account. There is of course always a need to consider the extent to which the QA body might be an arm of the state and how this may hamper the extent to which it is engaged with in an open and transparent manner.

There is need for a clear close relationship between quality assurance agencies and universities but this relies on the possibility of transparent and collegial engagement and the development of a shared understanding of the institution. While some quality assurance agencies see the principal purpose of external quality assurance as the enforcement of quality control guidelines, there is need for provision of advice and guidance in pursuit of improvements in the standards and quality of higher education.

9.4 Further study

The study was done in a very constrained context where resources were in critical shortage. Research findings mainly revolved around the acute resource shortage. It was therefore a circumstance in which quality assurance could potentially and easily lose relevance as even provision of basics for most universities was a challenge. Establishing quality assurance mechanisms and policies in the circumstances that prevailed could not guarantee a solution to quality problems, due to the absence of several enabling factors. Going forward, it would be necessary and interesting to investigate discourses that would construct ZIMCHE's role and quality assurance processes in an improved economic context characterised by an improved availability of critical resources.

This study involved participants from just a few universities. It would therefore be interesting to see if different results would be obtained if participants from all universities in the country, with and without quality assurance units, were involved, in order to augment information from ZIMCHE on discourses that construct quality assurance in higher education. There are also other significant players that influence quality of higher education such as HE ministry officials. It would be interesting to investigate their constructions of quality and the role of ZIMCHE. Furthermore, it would be interesting to look at the discourses of quality assurance from the position of other African countries as most of the literature focuses on a Western context.

The discourses that were identified as mechanisms in the data are not the only mechanisms that constructed the events and experiences (Elder-Vass, 2004) in quality assurance through ZIMCHE in QA in HE in Zimbabwe. As critical realists argue, multiple mechanisms are at play in the emergence of events. Therefore, while discourses potentially provide some important insights into constructing quality assurance through ZIMCHE, that did not constitute all the possible mechanisms that were at play. It would be interesting to carry out the same study to include in-depth non-discursive mechanisms.

9.5 Conclusion

This thesis highlighted the need to rethink and reconsider the context in which quality assurance mechanisms are implemented. It considered the ways in which quality assurance discourses have been imported without due consideration of context. The thesis also brought to the fore the importance of improved relationships of stakeholders in higher education, namely the quality assurance agencies and the universities. A mutual relationship of transparency is the

critical ingredient, and an enabler that enhances the potential for the achievement of vision and goals for quality of higher education.

The findings highlighted the role that quality assurance agencies play in higher education. Since quality assurance has become central to agendas in higher education, there is a need to negotiate the role of quality assurance agencies in ways that serve the academic project. The findings demonstrate a widespread need for more openness and for the development of more shared understanding of the academic project in higher education, and there is a need for negotiation of how they should work together and a critical review on the use of generic measures of quality.

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LIST OF DOCUMENTS

Document 1: Application for permission to collect data

Martin Linges vei 23 H0301

0962 Oslo

Norway

10th April 2015

The Secretary

Block G & F, Government Composite Building

Corner Samora Machel Avenue/ 4th Street, Harare

Reception: 4th Floor Block F

P. Bag CY7732

Causeway

HARARE

Zimbabwe

Dear Sir/Madam

RE: APPLICATION FOR A RESEARCH STUDY PERMISSION

I am currently undertaking a research study for my doctoral studies at Rhodes University, South Africa. The research title: 'Discursive constructions of quality assurance in higher education: The case of Zimbabwe'. In the study, I intent to explore issues that surround quality assurance in higher education in Zimbabwe, drawing insights from the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) and from a selected established universities.

This study will be significant in developing an understanding of the complex nature of quality assurance as a policy domain in higher education in general and in Zimbabwe in particular. This study can also be timely and relevant since quality assurance in higher education has received a lot of global emphasis and importance as well as in the Zimbabwean higher education system.

The research will be taken as a case study based largely on interviews and document analysis. This study cannot be completed without the participation of a number of higher education stakeholders in Zimbabwe, namely, ZIMCHE and some selected universities. Such stakeholder

participation in this research study would be of immense value and therefore permission is hereby sought to approach the stakeholders as for their participation in the study. I will respect the principle of voluntary participation in this study, that is, interviewees will be to participate and/or withdraw at any stage of the study. I will explain to the participants the purpose of the study so as to give them a chance to make their own informed choices. Additionally, their identities will be kept anonymous. The data that I shall obtain from the participants and documents will be for research purposes only while I will be ensure full disclosure of information regarding the findings of the research.

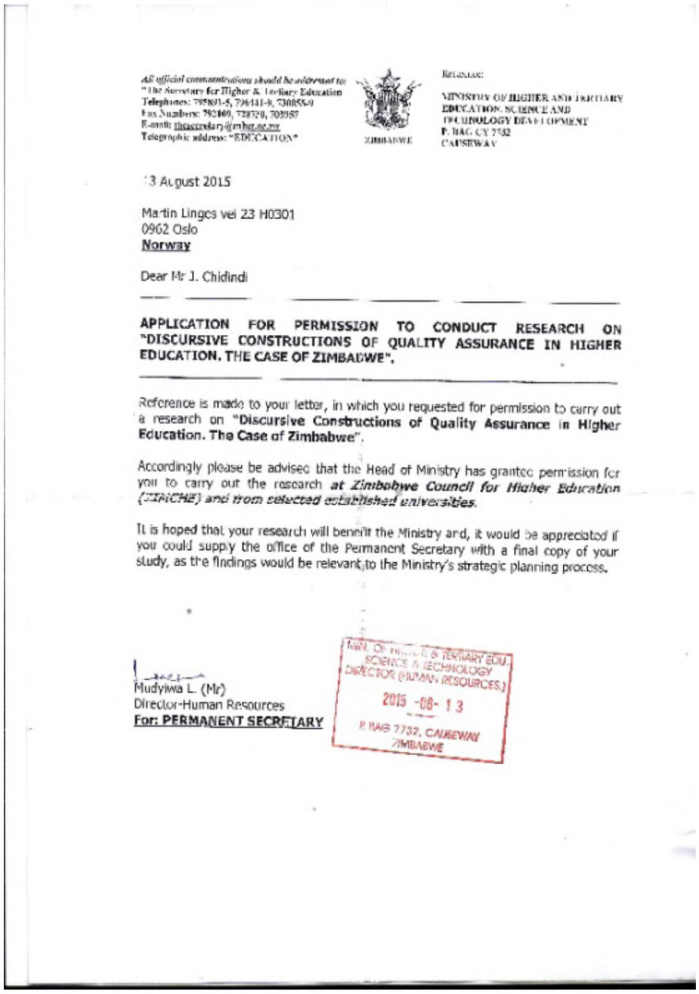
If you need further information on any issue regarding this study please feel free to contact me at josephchidindi@yahoo.com / shumba744@yahoo.no or alternatively you can contact my supervisor Professor Sioux McKenna at s.mckenna@ru.ac.za .

I thank you in advance for your assistance.

Yours sincerely

Joseph Chidindi

Document 2: HE Ministry letter of permission to collect data



All official communications should be addressed to:
"The Secretary for Higher & Tertiary Education
Telephones: 795801-5, 794141-9, 738855-9
Fax Numbers: 792460, 728720, 703957
E-mail: thesecretary@mhet.ac.zw
Telegraphic address: "EDUCATION"

ZIMBABWE

Reference:

MINISTRY OF HIGHER AND TERTIARY EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY DEVELOPMENT
P. BAG CY 7732
CAUSEWAY

13 August 2015

Martin Linges vei 23 H0301
0962 Oslo
Norway

Dear Mr J. Chidindi

APPLICATION FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH ON "DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION. THE CASE OF ZIMBABWE".

Reference is made to your letter, in which you requested for permission to carry out a research on **"Discursive Constructions of Quality Assurance in Higher Education. The Case of Zimbabwe"**.

Accordingly please be advised that the Head of Ministry has granted permission for you to carry out the research ***at Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZINCHE) and from selected established universities.***

It is hoped that your research will benefit the Ministry and, it would be appreciated if you could supply the office of the Permanent Secretary with a final copy of your study, as the findings would be relevant to the Ministry's strategic planning process.

Mudyiwa L. (Mr)
Director-Human Resources
For: PERMANENT SECRETARY

MIN. OF HIGHER & TERTIARY EDU. SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY
DIRECTOR (HUMAN RESOURCES)
2015 -08- 13
P. BAG 7732, CAUSEWAY
ZIMBABWE

Document 3: Informed Consent for Interview

Dear ……..

I am Joseph Chidindi and I am a PhD student at Rhodes University, South Africa. I am inviting you to participate in an interview for data collection on 'Discursive constructions of quality assurance in higher education: The case of Zimbabwe' research study. In this interview I will be asking you about your experiences and perceptions about quality assurance in higher education in Zimbabwe. Your experiences and perceptions can contribute to our understanding and knowledge of quality assurance in higher education in Zimbabwe. Before we begin the process I wish to share some information about the study with you.

Your participation in this interview is **voluntary**. I am extremely grateful for your participation and willingness to share your experiences and perceptions of quality assurance in higher education in Zimbabwe, but you are not obliged at all to participate. You are free to share those experiences and perceptions you prefer to share, and you are **free to withdraw** from the data collection process at any time.

It is important that I capture your words properly. I would therefore like your permission to **audio-record** the interview while your voice will be kept confidential.

The experiences and perceptions you provide will be for **research purpose only** while your name will remain **anonymous**.

On request, I will send you a **transcript** of the interview for your information and you are free to email me with any comments, amendments or concerns.

About any of your questions, concerns, or complaints you might have about your participation, you can contact my research supervisor Prof Sioux McKenna, who can be contacted on s.mckenna@ru.ac.za. You are also free to contact me at josephchidindi@yahoo.com .

Declaration:

I confirm that I understand the contents of this document and am participating voluntarily in this research.

Signature:

Full Name:

Date and place:

Document 4: Interview schedule for ZIMCHE and academic staff members

Discursive constructions of quality assurance in higher education: The case of Zimbabwe

1. What do you understand about the concept of quality in higher education? Which values do you think should underlie quality of education in HE?
2. Reflecting on quality assurance in universities through the ZIMCHE,
    a) What do you think about models, methods and procedures in quality assurance in HE in Zimbabwe?
    b) To what extent do you believe these have improved of HE?
3. What do you think about:
    a) Universities' involvement in developing quality assurance policies and practices in quality assurance in HE?
    b) Universities' input on policy development/revision on quality assurance?
    c) How do universities respond to policy drafts?
4. What is the level of your satisfaction with regard to:
    a) How often do universities get complete institutional reviews?
    b) Initiation of reviews?
    c) Those responsible for undertaking the reviews?
    d) The whole review process?
5. How do you evaluate quality assurance in HE in universities and its effectiveness?
6. One of ZIMCHE's mandates is mandated to ensure institutional quality assurance system in higher education.
    a) What do you think about the way ZIMCHE promotes sound QA practices in universities?
    b) What do you think about the mechanisms that are in place to ensure that universities meet QA requirements?
7. What is your view about the kind of support offered to universities in order to ensure and sustain their systematic QA development? What do you think about the collaborative linkages that exist in QA with:
    i) ZIMCHE
    ii) Local organizations
    iii) Regional organizations
    iv) International organizations
8. What do you think are successes and constraints faced in QA practices in universities? What is your view on how some of the constraints could be alleviated?
9. Is there anything else that you would like to share about your experiences in QA in Zimbabwe?

Document 5: Document analysis guide

Discursive constructions of quality assurance in higher education: The case of Zimbabwe

External drivers related questions

1. Who is/are the authors of documents? Who are the social actors surrounding the document?
2. Who is the intended audience of the document?
3. What is the socio-political context of the document?
4. What are the authors' intentions? What are aims of texts? What is the text trying to achieve (its mode of action)?
4. How is the audience addressed?
5. Whose point of view anyway (or whose ideology) is conveyed?
6. How are the documents produced?

Discourse/language/style related questions

1. What are the specific discursive and textual features of the document: i.e. topics/issues being addressed? What are the main discourses at work in the text?
2. What themes/claims are articulated?
3. What connections exist between the document and other documents? How does the text relate to other texts in the same genre?
4. What connections exist between the hard document and other texts?
5. How does the text relate to its broader context?
6. What discursive contributions of text does the document make to the quality assurance field?

a) What quality assurance position is made clear in the document?

b) What quality assurance is unclear in the document?

c) What is the historical context of the document?

d) How is the language of text in the document?

e) What style does the ZIMCHE use in quality assurance?

f) What genre of the text can be deduced from the document?

g) Which meanings and why are reflected in the document?

OTHER DOCUMENTS OBTAINED FROM ZIMCHE

Audits instrument number 1- Institutional mandates	Doc 7
Academic and Institutional audits instrument No. 2: Institutional information	Doc 8
Audits instrument - guide new	Doc 9
Accreditation criteria for programme accreditation	Doc 7
Accreditation establishment of new programme	Doc 8
Assessment instrument for assessing institutional compliance for accreditation	Doc 9
Programme inputs assessment (Accr 2C)	Doc 10
Criteria for accreditation of open and distance learning	Doc 11