Moving Beyond Accountability Toward a More Socially Conscious Guardianship of Higher Education Quality: An Examination of Quality Assurance and Accreditation Frameworks and Social Justice

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the University of Liverpool for the degree of Doctor of Education by Kimberlee Ann Moore

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a product of my own work, which has not, in any form, been presented to the University of Liverpool or any other university in support of an application for any other degree than that for which I am now a candidate.

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Abstract

Currently, most traditional models of higher education quality assurance tend to focus on continuous quality improvement, consumer protections, and public accountability with little to no attention given to national social justice priorities. This study explored the extent to which social justice concerns are considered in judgements of higher education quality and ways in which quality assurance and accreditation agencies can assist the higher education community in addressing issues within society that are connected to the social purposes of higher education. Using both qualitative and quantitative research methods, the study investigated how accreditation agencies in the United States and members of the South African quality assurance community facilitate engagement and attention to social justice issues. Key findings showed that US accrediting agencies are engaging in activities to facilitate higher education institutions achievement of social justice outcomes primarily through the use of accreditation standards and that quality enhancement activities allow more flexibility for agencies to incorporate social justice expectations into their oversight of institutions. The study concluded with lessons learned, recommendations for practice, and ideas for aiding the quality assurance and accreditation community in enhancing social justice efforts.

Keywords: Accreditation, Accountability, Access, Equity, Higher Education, Quality, Quality Assurance, Quality Enhancement, Social Justice

Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

"There is no such thing as a neutral education process. Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of generations into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the 'practice of freedom', the means by which men and women deal critically with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world" (as cited in Mayo, 1999, p. 5).

Many have argued the tremendous influence of higher education (HE) on society and what role it should play. Altbach (1998) noted that HE today encompasses a broad set of institutions including universities, ideas, and expectations that serve at the center of society, where knowledge is created and distributed, the workforce is trained; and political functions, thought, action, and training occur. In addition to the mission of teaching, research, and service, higher education institutions are the providers of basic research that fuel new technologies and improved health care (Duderstadt, 2008). Not only do higher education institutions (HEI) drive and facilitate economic growth and scientific discovery, but they also serve as agents for societal transformation (Rhodes, 2001).

Given the complexity of their roles, HEIs face a number of challenges both externally and internally (i.e., societal demands, accountability, complexity of organizations, diverse populations, funding, competition, etc). As such, the role of HE continues to be debated as national governments attempt to manage competing societal demands. In recent years, the focus on higher education as a public good has been influential in shaping the roles of the HE community and increasing the demand for accountability for specific domains of the university including access, participation, affordability, debt, employability, and social and economic impacts (Hazelkorn & Gibson, 2017). Additionally, the shifting demands in HE have intensified social justice issues of equity, access, and quality and increased the demands on national systems to provide diverse and quality higher education opportunities (Carnoy, 2005). For example, in the United States (US), there are sizeable disparities in higher education access, equity, and degree attainment based on racial and socioeconomic status (Cahalan et al, 2021). Similarly, in South Africa (SA), large gaps continue to exist between the top and lowest tier institutions coupled with overwhelming disparities in degree attainment rates between white and non-whites

(Macha & Kadakia, 2017). These same issues are not unique to the US and SA but are of global importance as evidenced by the United Nation's (UN) declaration of "inclusive and equitable quality education" (United Nations, n.d.) as one of its sustainable development goals. In particular, Goal 4.3 states that "By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university." As noted by the UN, access to a quality education enables upward socioeconomic mobility and is a vital to escaping poverty, fostering tolerance, and maintaining peaceful societies (United Nations, n.d.).

Ramaley (2013) and Egron-Polak (2018) respectively argued that the HE community can play a unique role in addressing many of the implications associated with the increased demand for higher education. In particular, quality assurance and accreditation (QAA) frameworks are extremely powerful in impacting change within HE systems, which makes them influential in shaping and facilitating the establishment and shifting of HEI's priorities (Singh, 2011). As quality frameworks are looked upon increasingly to ensure the public's trust in higher education (Kristoffersen, 2019), it may also be time to consider that quality agencies may be able to play a role in addressing many of the social issues prevalent today and assist in societal transformations.

Research Aim

Singh (2011) asked: "what are the possibilities for reframing quality assurance within an alternative political and policy project which includes and actively addresses social justice" (p.488)? She raised the question in the context where quality assurance (QA) of HE has become associated with mandatory and ingrained parts of governance structures often underpinned by notions of accountability with roots based in financial accounting and public management (Singh, 2011). The purpose of this research is to provide insights into how one might begin to answer the question raised by Singh (2011). My intention with this research was that it would help provide a critical look at QAA systems as well as to stimulate meaningful and culturally sensitive dialog about how QAA frameworks can help support social justice aspirations for a more equitable, inclusive, and democratically enabled society. Moreover, the intention was also to contribute original knowledge that may contribute to new models of QAA that surpass more traditional public accountability frameworks.

Research Questions

This research examined how QAA frameworks aid institutions in the mitigation of social justice issues. As such, the following questions were investigated:

1. How are US QAA agencies incorporating social justice dimensions into their expectations for institutions and/or programs to address social justice concerns?

2. How do differences in QAA agencies' focus on quality assurance and/or enhancement influence how agencies operationalize standards, policies, and procedures for addressing social justice concerns?

3. What lessons, if any, can US higher education QAA agencies learn from SA QAA organizations regarding the incorporation of social justice elements into the oversight of institutional and programmatic quality?

4. What more can be done by US QAA agencies to enhance responses to specific social justice concerns? What guidance can be provided to aid agencies in facilitating the mitigation of social justice issues?

This research has provided an opportunity for the traditional notions of QAA in the US to be reexamined and provided a foundation for how these systems can produce and more positively impact relevant social justice outcomes, including socioeconomic and health outcomes. On a more practical level, my research aim was to stimulate conversations about how QAA agencies can initiate or expand upon their efforts to be more socially focused or incorporate social justice into their work. As such, my research has been guided by Nancy Fraser's (2009) critical theory of social justice to explore the aforementioned issues.

Context of the Research

In the midst of completing this doctoral thesis, the relationship of HE quality assurance and accreditation and social justice in the US became more connected than in previous years and prior to the beginning my research in 2019. Due to several converging factors, America's long-standing and unresolved history with social justice issues was laid bare the for the entire world to witness in disbelief and outrage in 2020. In early 2020 as the global pandemic brought the entire world to a standstill, many long-standing social and economic issues in the US were exacerbated and spotlighted for the world to see on an open stage. Health disparities among people along social and economic lines were highlighted as the media reported on COVID-19's devastating

impact on minority communities and those from lower economic status groups. According to Landrigan et al (2021), Black, Hispanic and Native American populations were disproportionately affected by COVID-19, facing higher levels of illness, death, and larger challenges to medical treatment and levels of care. In facing these disparities, many questioned the systematic reasons for disparities including issues of access and discrimination.

Coupled with the sobering reality of COVID-19 pandemic, the deep and unresolved legacy of systematic racism and discriminatory practices in US society were highlighted in a series of well-publicized incidents. Examples included the mistreatment of immigrants and separation of families at the US southern border, who entered the US illegally, and the deaths of several African- Americans at the hands of law-enforcement including the much-publicized death of George Floyd in May 2020. Floyd was an unarmed Black man, who was killed by a white police officer after being arrested for allegedly using a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill in a convenience store. Videos of the arrest and Floyd's death were widely circulated on social and broadcast media, sparking massive protests across the US and international responses (Dreyer et al, 2020). As a result of confluences of challenges, tensions in the US were high during this time resulting in social unrest, nation-wide protests, calls for racial justice, and the reexamination of institutions across society to address institutional racism.

Specifically, US HEIs and accrediting agencies were brought into the national dialog regarding many of the issues spotlighted coupled with ongoing debates about the purpose of these institutions in 2020. Over the past fifteen years, within the HE landscape in the US, accreditation has been a hot button issue which has been precipitated in large part by the public's growing frustration with the affordability, quality, and accountability of HE. Much criticism has been leveled at accreditation from all perspectives. In some cases, critics lay the blame for the challenges in HE on accrediting agencies and even recommended that a total overhaul of the accreditation system take place (Gaston, 2013); however, it seems very unlikely that an alternative system will be implemented anytime soon (Lederman, 2015). Although, this should not preclude examinations of and exploration of ways to improve the existing system in the US. Of specific interest for me was how the QAA could aid the HE community in addressing social issues as a focus area for improvement. As such, I purposefully looked at how and if other countries incorporate efforts to address social issues as a part of their QAA systems, hoping to gain insights to help inform and stimulate conversations regarding the US system. In particular, I

looked to SA where intentional efforts were made to reorient its quality assurance system toward a "progress reform" agenda in order to promote social justice and social transformation after the fall of apartheid in 1990s. At the time of this study, the SA QAA system led by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) was preparing to revise several elements of its system in responses to lessons learned from the implementation of the "progress agenda". As such, the SA data gathered and reviewed was based on the system and policies in place from 1997 to 2021.

Background Information for the Study

For the US, social justice issues are not a new topic. The US has a long history with diverse forms of inequality (racial, economic, gender) and injustice with many stemming from the conquest of Indigenous people and the brutal system of slavery to the exploitation of Asians and other non-white members of society for labor purposes (Allen & Chung, 2000). Similar to the US, SA has also struggled with the unjust and unfair society resulting from colonialism and a past based on a system of racial segregation and discrimination. Like the Jim Crow laws that governed parts of the US in the early to mid-20th century, South African apartheid was a system of institutionalized segregation by race that lasted from the 1950s to the mid- to late 20th century. The implications of these discriminatory systems continue to have profound effects within these societies (Zinkel, 2019). As such, the HE community specifically the QAA community in these countries have made some efforts to address issues. Examples include affirmative action and diversity issues featured in US accreditation and social justice and social transformation criteria within the SA QAA system (Lange and Singh as cited in Singh, 2010).

Because both the US and SA examples demonstrate a relationship between social justice and HE, it is clear that more actionable research is required. This study aims to contribute to that body of knowledge by examining the role of social justice in the assessment of HE quality. To this end, Nancy Fraser's three-dimensional social justice approach has been used to examine to HE QAA as its components offer a useful lens for analysis of social justice in HE that will be further explained in chapter 5 (Fraser, 2011).

Overview of Quality Assurance and Accreditation in United States and South Africa

QAA have been a part of HE for more than 100 years in the US. Accreditation, one of the most popular forms of QA, involves an external review process to ensure external standards have

been met (Sanyal & Martin, 2007). Prior to World War II, accreditation in the US was a non-governmental process that provided institutions with a mechanism for allowing students to transfer from one institution to another. HEIs took the initiative to establish the two processes for quality assessment including accreditation and academic program review (Craft, 2018). After the 1950s, accreditation became a major component of how the government ensured quality control among institutions (Brown, et al, 2017). It is intended to assure quality, provide institutions and programs access to government funding; engender private sector confidence in the education provided by institutions; and help ease the transfer of course and program credits among HEIs (Eaton, 2015). Currently, there are about 80 accrediting organizations (institutional and programmatic) within the US that are recognized by the national government via the United States Department of Education (USDE) and/or the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), a private, non-governmental organization. Institutional accrediting agencies are responsible for evaluating quality at the institutional level from multiple perspectives to ensure that the institutions' various parts are contributing to the achievement of their mission and goals. On a more microlevel, programmatic or specialized accreditors review specialized and professional units within institutions (e.g., programs, departments, schools) for quality. These units are often housed in institutions accredited by an institutional accrediting agency. Additionally, programmatic or specialized agencies may review single purpose free standing higher education institutions (e.g., vocational, specialized, or non-educational settings-hospitals) to ensure quality, thus taking on a role similar to institutional accreditors (USDE, 2019). Overall, recognized accrediting agencies are responsible for the oversight of more than 6,500 HEIs in 50 states and 125 other countries and review 20,000 of programs in a range of professional and specialty areas (CHEA Almanac, n.d.), "including law, medicine, business, nursing, social work, pharmacy, arts and journalism" (Eaton, 2015, p.1).

Furthermore, the accreditation process is carried out and managed by a corps of volunteers and professional staff. Volunteers (elected and/or appointed) and accreditation staff serve a vital role at agencies by conducting the accreditation process and making decisions about the quality of institutions and programs based on predetermined criteria. These decisions are influenced by various individual interpretations of the written standards, policies, and procedures; and value judgements. Staff serve to manage volunteers, providing important information to volunteers to guide decision-making and serve as liaisons between the accrediting

agency and the institutions and/or programs that they accredit (Levrio, 1989). In 2013, it was reported that accreditors employed over 832 staff and worked with over 19,000 volunteers (CHEA Almanac, n.d.).

Both USDE and CHEA recognition signal to the public that accrediting agencies adhere to best practices in accreditation and specific quality standards for providing policies, processes, and standards to ensure: 1. academic quality, 2. continuous improvement, and 3. accountability for the HE programs and institutions that they accredit (USDE, 2019). Recognition by each agency is voluntary and requires accrediting agencies to adhere to standards and guidelines in order to maintain recognition. This process is similar to the accreditation process that institutions and programs undergo (Eaton, 2015).

USDE recognition is meant to assure that accrediting agencies appropriately oversee and help support institutions and programs that receive governmental funding. Specifically, USDE recognition allows for institutions or programs accredited by USDE recognized agencies access to US government funding (e.g., student federal financial aid and grant programs) and assure that these federal funds are used for quality courses and programs (CHEA About, n.d.). In some cases, states within the US require institutions or programs be accredited by USDE recognized accrediting agencies to have state authority to operate or for graduates of programs be eligible for state licensure where applicable for some professions (CHEA About, n.d.). The USDE only recognizes accrediting agencies that serve as gatekeepers for US federal funds. All USDE recognized agencies are required to adhere to overarching guidelines articulated by the US Higher Education Act to ensure quality (CHEA About, n.d.). As such, institutional and/or programmatic quality is evaluated on the following by accrediting agencies:

1. whether the institution is meeting its mission, vision, and objectives;

2. financial and academic inputs (resources, faculty, curriculum, student supports, governance);

 3. business and academic planning;

4. student learning assessment and continuous improvement processes;

5. performance or outcome measures (graduation, job placements, licensure pass rates

and completion rates) (CHEA About, n.d.).

USDE recognition is funded by the US government (Eaton, 2015) and is granted by the USDE
based on agencies compliance with the recognition criteria and input from the National Advisory
Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI). NACIQI is an advisory board
composed of individuals appointed by the USDE and members of the US Congress that provides
recommendations on whether agencies should be recognized by the USDE (NACIQI, n.d.).

While CHEA has a similar recognition process to the USDE, CHEA recognition is
focused on assuring that accrediting agencies maintain and improve academic quality and be
held accountable to the public through quality standards determined by the academic community
(CHEA Almanac, n.d.). Specifically, CHEA recognition standards are based on agencies'
abilities to demonstrate they have standards for the institutions or programs they accredit
including: the advancement of academic quality by having clear definitions of quality and
expectations; the provision of accurate, consistent, and reliable information about student
achievement and academic quality; and encouragement of continuous improvement.
Additionally, CHEA standards focus on an accrediting agency's ability to maintain fair and
appropriate agency decision-making policies and procedures; undertake ongoing self-evaluation
of their accrediting activities and practices; and maintain sufficient, stable, and predictable
resources to support accreditation operations. CHEA recognition is funded by institutional
membership dues (Eaton, 2015). CHEA's Board of Directors grants recognition to accrediting
agencies based on recommendations from CHEA's Committee on Recognition which is
comprised of members appointed by the Board. These members represent the HE community
including accrediting agencies, institutional faculty and leadership, and experts within the
academic and accreditation community (CHEA Standards, 2021).

In contrast to the long-standing history of QAA in US, the current South African QAA
framework has only existed since the 1990's after the dismantling of apartheid, when all
institutions within SA including the HE system were reexamined (Kistan, 1999). Apartheid was
the system that governed relations between white and non-white South Africans from the 1950s
until the 1990s. This system perpetuated poverty and exacerbated income poverty in SA
(Seekings, 2011). Specifically, public policies sanctioned racial segregation and political and

economic discrimination against of non-white South Africans in institutions throughout society (Clark & Worger, 2013) including education.

Currently, SA QAA is authorized through the SA Higher Education Act of 1997 and involves institutional audits, program accreditation, national review, quality promotion and capacity development; and self-accreditation. QAA is carried out by CHE and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). The CHE sets the national policy guidelines and the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC), a permanent committee of the CHE, is responsible for carrying out the external quality assurance functions including institutional audits and accreditation of academic programs (Gouws & Waghid, 2006). The SAQA implements many of the guidelines articulated by the CHE and is responsible for defining and managing the national quality framework; and providing accreditation and oversight for Education and Training Quality Assurance (ETQA) agencies that accredit educational providers by discipline and Sector Education and Training Authorities that provide oversight vocational training for different sectors in the country (Macha & Kadakia, 2017). Due to newer challenges in the SA HE landscape compared to two decades ago, a new integrated QA system was proposed in 2017 which called for a reaffirmation of the underlining fundamental principles of quality in SA and a review how the various operating components under the framework can be better integrated (CHE, 2017). As such, CHE working with SAQA and the Department of Higher Education and Training, reexamined the QAA system so that it would reflect the changes in HE since the establishment of the current system and streamlined QAA processes, while ensuring that an updated QA framework would advance national priorities including transformation and social justice. The CHE introduced the new QA framework in 2021 which was intended as a strategic tool. One purpose of the new framework was to "strengthen the relevance of HEIs to social, environmental, economic issues and justice in SA (CHE, 2021, P.29)." Furthermore, there was an acknowledgement that HEIs "should develop appropriate approaches to social impact, social justice and changes in their cultures" that are supported by the institutional planning efforts, structures, policies, and processes (CHE, 2021).

Position of the Researcher

My position as a researcher is aligned with the pragmatic approach where I find myself seeking the most practical way to find answers. Under this approach, one sees reality as negotiable and guided by the most practical research methods to answer research questions

(Patel, 2015), which is typically associated with mixed methods (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). The use of mixed method assumes that the combination of methods yields a better understanding of a phenomenon than the use of qualitative or quantitative methods separately (Creswell, 2011). Based on my research questions, this approach resonated with me and guided my decision to utilize both qualitive and quantitative methods. In consideration of the qualitative aspects of the study, I understand that as the researcher, I served an important role in the research process including the primary data collector and in translating and interpreting the data (Poggenpoel & Myburgh, 2003). According to Bourke (2014), "the cogency of the research process rises from the relationship between the research instrument (the researcher) and the participants (p.3)." The facilitative interaction between the researcher and the research context helps make the research believable and insightful (Eisner, 2017). As such, acknowledging the role of positionality in qualitative research is extremely important for establishing credibility to the process. Positionality describes the researcher's stance in relation to the social and political context of the research study including research participants, the community or organization. It impacts every phase of the research process (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014).

As for my positionality, I am an African American, college educated, woman, raised in a rural small town in the southern US. I am the daughter of working-class parents and the grandchild of sharecroppers. I am a member of one of the first generations in my family in the US not to have to pick cotton as an economic necessity for survival nor have I directly experienced legal racial segregation unlike my parents. I have lived the majority of my adult life in the suburbs of Washington, DC where I pursued my graduate education. My lived experiences and educational background have provided me with an awareness and sensitivity of inequalities and social injustices related to people of color, women, and socioeconomic status at all levels (locally, nationally, and globally) especially how these elements intersect. As such, my academic studies, personal interests, and civic engagement have led me to gravitate toward understanding social issues and how to contribute to solutions.

Importance to Me

Throughout my life, I have been concerned with social issues impacting marginalized groups and the unjust or unfair treatment of others. In finding my path toward making the world a better place, I majored in political science as an undergraduate and social public policy as a

graduate student with an aim of cultivating a professional career that would allow me to have a meaningful contribution to society. My academic focus allowed me to gain both knowledge and analytical skills to examine the relevant historical, political, economic and institutional factors impacting public policy and a sense of how I could understand and assist in tacking issues related to societal inequalities.

Since earning my master's degree in public policy, my professional career has been within the HE QAA and public policy fields. I worked for a number of years for a US accrediting organization that was responsible for setting quality standards for postsecondary institutions in the vocational and technical sector of HE primarily within the US. This sector primarily included students of color; first generation college students; and non-traditional students. Beginning my career in this sector, I saw first-hand the transformative impact of HE for many students. Over the years, I have continued my career in QAA, working for both QAA organizations and at HEIs to ensure quality is at the center of HE activities. In these roles, I have had the opportunity to see the impactful and constructive role that QAA plays in assisting institutions but, I have also observed many frustrations and shortcomings associated with QAA as its role of effectiveness and accountability in quality scrutiny has been on the foreground, rather than a possible role in social justice. I most recently served as the chief accreditation officer for a health programmatic accrediting agency recognized by the USDE. The agency provides quality oversight for more than 350 graduate education programs audiology and speech-language pathology. During my career, I have often been curious about how to combine my interests in social justice concerns with my day-to-day professional experiences as a quality assurance professional and how I could contribute to my profession.

In becoming more involved in the QAA community, I find myself drawn to conversations and discussions that seem to be outside of the traditional realm of quality assurance, which tend to focus on accountability, to more socially relevant conversations involving QAA (e.g., issues of diversity in higher education; social transformations; etc.). For example, in 2018 while attending a QAA conference, I had an opportunity, through a causal conversation with a colleague, to learn about how a health accrediting agency was reviewing ways it could help its institutions combat disparities in health outcomes specifically around African American maternal birth mortality rates. As my colleague recited the staggering statistics

and her agency's response, I was captivated. For example, researchers found in an examination of vital records from 2016-2017, that the maternal mortality rate for non-Hispanic black women in the US was 3.5 times that of non-Hispanic women (MacDorman et al, 2021). In learning about these disparities, the statistics resonated with and shocked me for a number of reasons. As an African American woman, I felt I could fall into this category and many of my family members or friends could be impacted by these stark disparities. Prior to that moment, I was unaware of the severeness of the inequalities among groups. As such, I was extremely interested in the efforts of this agency.

The exchange was insightful for me because the agency's focus was on a societal problem beyond traditional accountability measures (employability or graduation rates) and also focused on finding solutions to a "wicked problem." Ramaley (2014) described "wicked problems" as those problems that tend to permeate society locally and globally for which collective and public problem-solving offer ways to combat the issues. They often present in the face of continuous change or new challenges that involve various stakeholders adding to the complexity of solving these issues. Not all problems are wicked, but those that tend to be characterized by confusion and discord and remain unsolved, unresolved, or nagging. One only has to look at the news headlines for examples (e.g., immigration, poverty, health care disparities, poverty, gun control, etc). As such, society is not without its share of problems that fall into the wicked category. Looking at the role of HE and QAA, my hope is that my examination of QAA's role can shed light on how the HE community can be better positioned to help tackle many of today's wicked problems.

Structure of the Thesis

The following thesis consists of five subsequent chapters. The introductory chapter, as noted in the previous section, provides an overview of the study and introduction to the research questions, key background and contextual information, as well as, information about my position as a researcher. Chapter 2 provides an extensive literature which reflects my attempt to gain understanding and build knowledge of the field by presenting some of the existing research and debates regarding HE and social justice. Next, chapter 3 includes a detailed account of the methodology used to conduct the study. Moreover, chapter 4 details the results of the study accompanied by brief analysis and discussion, and chapter 5 provides more detailed discussion

about the results and outcomes of the study along with lessons learned and recommendations for practice. Lastly, chapter 6 provides my concluding discussion about the study. This chapters includes my observations, the study's limitations, my final reflections on the research process, and thoughts on future areas of research. In addition to the chapters outlined, the thesis includes several appendices which provide supplementary information for readers to gain a more comprehensive understanding of some of the information presented in the body of the thesis.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Chapter Overview

The literature review serves as the foundation of research projects because it allows the researcher and the thesis reader to understand the literature in the field on the specific topic of interest (Boote & Beile, 2005). As such, this chapter is intended to provide a scholarly and historical context for my study while highlighting the scope and/or limits of the research available as well as the rationale for boundaries in the literature. This chapter begins with a discussion of a broad view of the purpose of HE, quality in HE and social justice, then it delves deeper into quality and social justice within the context of HE QA. Specifically, this review provides a survey of the existing literature on how QA and social justice have been investigated and discussed in current literature and of prominent theories associated with social justice. The chapter ends with a summary and a brief preview of chapter 3.

Purpose of Higher Education

The purpose and impact of HE have evolved and been highly debated throughout history across multiple disciplines and contexts. It is difficult to examine the purpose of HE without giving some attention to earlier levels and perspectives of education. Views have ranged from enlightenment thought, where the purpose of education was to create people who could think independently and learn on their own, to more modern views related to socialization and the transmission of skills (Vadeboncoeur, 1997). In the context of human development, the debate in recent history about the topic has largely centered around individual cognitive development and social transformation (Vadeboncoeur, 1997). Specifically, these concepts were illustrated in the context of democratic societies, by the works of John Dewey and Paulo Freire, two of the most influential educational theorists of the 20ᵗʰ century. They both contributed ideas about the purposes of education that were concerned with both intellectual and practical connections between education and politics (Feinberg & Torres, 2001). Dewey (1916) noted that the central aim of education is to broaden one's intellect along with developing both problem solving and critical thinking skills in order to facilitate democracy and life-long learning. Freire (1996) argued that education is not only about the transmission of information; rather its purpose is about helping people to reach their individual capacities and meet their human potential and serving as an emancipation from oppression. More recently, Biesta (2015) drawing upon the

ideas of Dewey and Freire, argued that education has three primary purposes as a result of functioning in different domains—qualification, socialization, and subjectification. Qualification refers to the acquisition of knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions' (learning how to survive in society); socialization is concerned with how through education we learn to be a part of cultural, political and, and religious traditions (Biesta, 2015); and subjectification refers to the 'subjectivity or "subject-ness" of individuals being educated on how to exist as actors assuming responsibility rather than as objects subject to the action of others (Biesta, 2015). He suggested that there is more emphasis on the 'qualification' aspect and less on the other two purposes in the current perception of education. Additionally, Biesta (2015) argued that there is a difference between learning and education and that the emphasis is on learning, rather than on education. Specifically, Biesta (2015) noted that the differences in learning and education have facilitated an understanding of education related to economic terms, which make it difficult to understand the purpose of education uncoupled from market forces rather than a purpose concerned with professional judgement or democratic deliberation (Biesta, 2006). Biesta (2006) was not alone in noting the economic implications of how the purposes of education are intertwined. For example, Zainulabdin (2008) noted that education's purpose is to prepare people to live economically satisfying lives.

Specifically, in HE, conversations about its purpose have often been grounded in economics, since it is the last educational stage for many prior to entering the labor market (Krymodas, 2017). Altbach (1998) provided a modern perspective of HE which reflected various historical viewpoints about the purposes of education and specifically HE as well as the economic focus. Altbach (1998) noted that HE includes a broad set of institutions including universities, ideas, and expectations that serve at the center of society, where knowledge is created and distributed; the work force is trained; and political functions of thought, action, and training occur. Additionally, Rhodes (2001) noted that HE drives scientific discovery and economic growth. Furthermore, Krymodas (2017) elaborated on the evolution of HE's purpose by arguing that HE 's purpose has evolved from human development (intrinsic) to a purpose that views HE as an "instrument of economic progress" (instrumental). Intrinsically, the purpose of HE is disconnected from economic losses and gains, while the instrumental purpose is seen as an investment which results in particular financial yields within the labor market (Kromydas, 2017).

The conversations regarding the economic context have also generated attention to the effects of a more instrumental view of HE. This view underlies debates about HE's purpose within the context of social transformation, addressing social inequalities, and the fast-growing number of student enrollments (massification) (Hornsby & Osman, 2014). Given the changing demands on society, some argued that HE exacerbates social and economic issues. For instance, Carnoy (2005) noted that equity, access, and quality issues have been intensified due to the current HE model and the demand for HE. Specifically, Mettler (2014) argued that US HE reinforces social inequalities and economic disparities due to its close relationships with corporate interests, the federal government, and the dysfunctional system of American politics.

Conversely, others have argued that HE serves as an agent of social transformation (Rhodes, 2001). Recently, due to the changing societal demands, the university has been discussed with renewed interest around serving the public good. According to Hazelkorn (2020) the debate centers around "what are universities good for, not what are they good at." (Hazelkorn, 2020, p. 1). Shapiro (2009) examined the contemporary relationship between HE and society and argued that HE's central role is based in serving a public good and that HE is better equipped at dealing with economic and social issues than private markets. Shapiro (2009) argued that universities have a social responsibility to address issues and should not be focused solely on antecedent commitments or amassing resources, knowledge, and wisdom. (Shapiro 2009, XVI prologue). Henard (2016) argued that the public wants HE to have greater involvement in society by embracing its social purposes or third mission in addition to their other core missions of teaching, learning, and research. Moreover, Purcell (2008) argued more strongly that universities should refocus their efforts from pursuing knowledge for the sake of it to pursuing knowledge to contribute to economic, cultural, and social benefits (Purcell as cited in Henard, 2016). As such, some have argued that attention to social justice should be at the forefront of higher educational practices and research (MacArthur & Aswin, 2020). Similar to Shapiro (2009) and Henard (2016), Ramaley (2013) and Egron-Polak (2018) respectively argued that the HE community can play a unique role in addressing many of the implications associated with the increased demand for HE and various societal issues. Specifically, Ramaley (2014), Hazelkorn (2020), and McMillan, Goodman, and Schmid (2016) advocated for universities to engage more directly with communities to address complex societal issues. For example, they highlighted the efforts of several countries and universities including those made by SA as

reflected in the restructuring process of its HE system to address social and economic issues after the end of apartheid.

Quality in Higher Education

Given the importance and prevalence of HE, not only is its purpose continuously discussed, but also what constitutes quality in HE. For example, as previously noted, quality in HE is of global importance as reflected by the United Nation (UN)'s call to action for nations via the Sustainable Development Goals. In particular, the goals include a commitment to "inclusive and equitable quality education (United Nations, n.d.). "By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university (United Nations, n.d.)." Not only does the UN advocate for countries to address providing access to HE to marginalized groups, but there is recognition that access to HE must also be affordable and of good quality. The case for quality HE coupled with the growing demand for HE has garnered much attention throughout the literature.

So, what is quality? Quality is a difficult term to define despite its use in everyday vocabulary. The struggle with its use arises, because the concept of quality is contextually bound and is viewed differently depending on the stakeholders (Elssay, 2015). As such, quality within the context of HE garners a great deal of attention with scholars debating its definition and how to measure it. Hamon and Meek (2000) argued that quality refers to the judgement about a certain level of achievement and the value and worth associated with that achievement. Specifically, Harvey and Green (1993) argued that educational quality falls into five categories: exceptional, perfection, fitness for purpose, value for money, and transformative. Furthermore, Van Kemendade et al (2008) acknowledging the impact of context as it relates to quality, noted that one must consider the quality of "what", while also arguing for a concept that includes four value components: object, standard, subject, and values. Similarly, Blanco-Ramirez and Berger (2014) argued for a reexamination of quality in HE, noting that theorization about HE quality in the global dimension is lacking. They argued that evaluating and improving quality should account for context and incorporate a concept of value that links quality with relevance, access, and investment (Blanco-Ramirez & Berger, 2014). Overall, the efforts to define quality are often debated in academic circles around the assessment, evaluation, and implementation of quality standards and at which level will it to be carried out—via subnational, national, regional, and/or

international QA systems. As such, quality continues to mean different things to different stakeholders and poses significant challenges when attempting to reconcile meanings. As such, defining and determining quality measures often becomes a political exercise (Sanyal & Martin, 2007) within HE.

Recent discussions regarding the current state of QA have advocated that student achievement be at the center of HE quality and that future conversations of quality involve additional public scrutiny of the meanings of quality and more consideration of social justice, equity, inequality, and freedom of speech (CHEA, 2019). These conversations reflect others' views, who have called for the reexamination of what counts as quality and greater consideration of social justice and equity when addressing quality. For example, Cruz (2009) argued that HEIs must not only address economic and workforce needs, but also address relevant societal issues. Thus, ensuring quality is more than an abstract concept but is real and meaningful. Therefore, any efforts to improve or evaluate quality in HEIs must include a more tangible interpretation and application of quality that accounts for specific contexts and for considerations that are relevant to the respective HEI as well as addressing societal problems. Sobrino (2007) noted that quality is a social construct which takes into consideration reflection, dialog, and collective effort and thus it must account for the context in which HEIs operate (Sobrino as cited in Cruz 2009). Despite arguments for the inclusion of more attention to social issues, Henard (2016) argued that current QA frameworks are primarily driven by funding and reputation. As a result, most QA systems do not require institutions to evidence how their achievements address societal needs. Henard's (2016) observations were particularly relevant given the prevalence of reputation via rankings in HE over the last 25 years.

Debates about HE quality would not be complete with a discussion about rankings. Michael (2015) argued that rankings are extremely influential and are a permanent fixture in HE. University league tables and rankings were originally launched in the US but have become present in more than 40 countries. Rankings often provide relevant information to the public about universities and are seen as an international measure and/or proxy of quality (Michael, 2015). In some cases, the use of rankings provides value to the public in some countries that lack formal QA systems (CHEA, 2019). For instance, Federkeil (2008) noted that rankings indirectly contribute to QA on a systems level by providing a mechanism for transparency and

inspiring competition among HEIs. Furthermore, rankings may motivate institutions to become better therefore leading to a collective improvement of the system; however, this depends on the indicators used in the rankings (Federkeil, 2008). Despite their popularity, rankings have many critics. For example, Amsler and Bolsmann (2012) argued that rankings facilitate new forms of social exclusion in society. Moreover, and most frequently, criticism is based on the methodologies used to produce the rankings. Often, a range of indicators is used to assess HEIs then aggregated to a single score which serves as a proxy of quality for the entire institution (Hazelkorn, 2013; Hazelkorn, 2015). Despite the popularity and prevalence of rankings, the criticism is well noted regarding rankings role in QA. As such, Michael (2015) argued that QA systems, specifically accreditation, are much better positioned to address and promote quality within HEIs especially when the processes include a focus on quality improvement.

Quality Assurance and Quality Enhancement in Higher Education

Conversations about quality in HE are often underpinned with discussions of quality assurance (QA) and quality enhancement (QE) or improvement. QA has become a common term to describe all forms of external quality monitoring and review and in some ways is expected to serve too many purposes (Williams, 2010). According to Harman and Meek (2000), QA has been described as both internal and external processes. Internal QA often refers to a systematic approach by institutions or programs to implement and manage policies and mechanisms to ensure that they are meeting their performance objectives and standards. External QA refers to an examination or evaluation of an institution or program by an external organization to assess whether predetermined standards are met (Harman & Meek, 2000). For many in HE, QA is synonymous with accountability, while others see it as way to ensure quality of teaching or existing processes (Williams, 2016). Additionally, Cheng (2003) argued that there are three different paradigms of QA in education: "internal," "interface," and "future" that have characterized educational reforms. Internal is focused on improving the internal environment and processes leading to planned goals. QA under this paradigm is focused on improving the effectiveness of internal processes of teaching and learning to achieve specific goals. Interface QA is focused on public accountability and ensuring that education services satisfy stakeholders' needs. Lastly, the future paradigm focuses on ensuring the relevance of aims, content, practice, and outcomes for education for future generations. Reflecting Cheng's (2003) first two phases,

Harvey (2004-23) defined QA as processes that allow for stakeholders to have confidence in the provision of inputs, processes, and outcomes that meet or fulfill minimum expectations. Harvey's (2004-23) definition did not include references to enhancement or improvement; however, Biggs (2001) noted that QA falls within two categories: retrospective and prospective which include both elements of accountability and enhancement. Respective QA focuses on accountability by taking historical views of what has been done to make summative judgements about whether external standards have been met taking on a more managerial than academic approach. This approach is associated with a check list approach to standards (Biggs, 2001). On the other hand, prospective QA focuses on improvement and the future, looking mainly at how quality relates to teaching and learning and how these will continue to align with the institutional purpose (Filippakou &Tapper, 2008).

QE is often discussed in the context of QA and also may have different meanings. Williams (2010) argued that QA is a catchall term which includes QE. Campbell and Rosznayi (2002) noted that QE is a definition of quality while Harvey (2004-23) specifically noted that QE is related to the process of improvement or augmentation which includes two strands of QE— student learning and the improvement of the quality of institutions or programs of study. Filippakou and Tapper (2008), like others, define QA as a process related to judgement of quality based on whether standards or criteria are met; however, QE is focused on enhancement which is a less bounded process, which allows more opportunity for dialog and interpretation. As such, they noted different views about the relationships between the concepts, including an inherent tension, where QA and QE have nothing to do with each other or that QA diverts the attention away from QE. Additionally, they noted a positive symbiotic relationship where QA leads to QE.

As previously noted, QA and QE for some represent separate and distinct processes and for others QA and QE represent processes that are intertwined (Williams, 2016). In an effort to expand on the concepts of the QA and QE, Elassy (2015) suggested that QA and QE processes are on a quality continuum as highlighted in Figure 2.1. Figure 2.1 illustrates QA as a diagnostic process that is aimed at assessing quality to determine strengths and limitations, and the QE process is focused on improving quality or a curative process for the limitations found during the QA processes. As such, QA and QE are found on a continuum, which reflects them as integrated

and sequential concepts within an interactive process, and both concepts should be utilized in order to lead to improved quality in HE (Elassy, 2015). Moreover, in terms of importance and relevance, Singh (2010) and Elassy (2015) noted a greater focus on QE over the past few years.

Figure 2.1 The continuum of Quality (QA-QE) (Elassy, 2015, p. 256)

Quality Assurance
•Assessment/Diagnostic

Quality Enhancement
•Improvement/Treatment
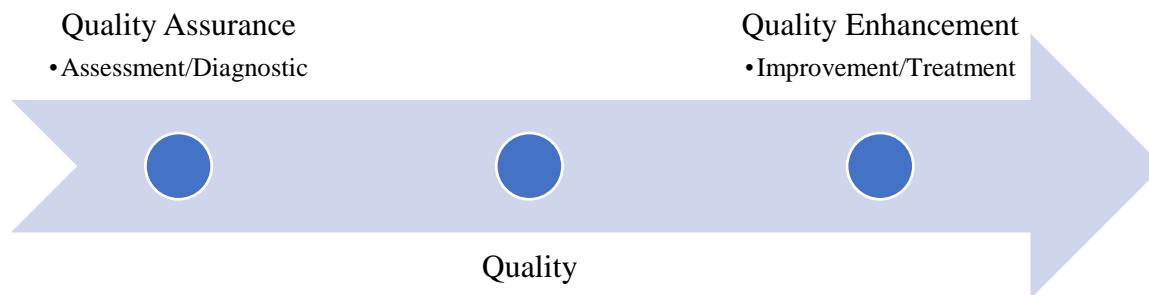
Quality

Quality Assurance Systems

QA is typically used to describe all forms of external monitoring and review (Williams, 2010). As such, a variety of methods are used to assess quality when applying them to different units of analysis (institutions, programs, or courses) in HE (Sanyal & Martin, 2007). QA methods are influenced by the diagnostic needs of stakeholders; maturity and scope of the QA system; and the types of organizations engaged in the QA activities (Harman & Meek, 2000; Cruz, 2009). QA agencies use three primary methods to assess quality: quality audits, quality assessment, and accreditation. A quality audit is an examination of an institution or program to determine if there are adequate QA procedures in place. Quality assessment is the evaluation of policies, processes, procedures, practices, programs, and services (Sanyal & Martin, 2007). Lastly, accreditation is a process whereby an external body, either governmental, quasigovernmental, or private body evaluates the quality of HEIs as a whole or specific units within institutions HEI (programs or courses) based on certain predetermined standards.

Accreditation is the most widely used QA method in HE (Harman & Meek, 2000; Cruz, 2009; Sanyal and Martin, 2007), and the method used in the US for more than a century.

Similar to the US, European countries also have deep rooted QA systems (Valeikienė, 2017) that fall within the following models (Prisăcariu, 2014): assurance of operational effectiveness; external quality reviews based on fixed standards; assessments of student learning outcomes; and the evaluation alignment with institutions' missions and objectives only. For countries with newer HE systems, QA is aimed more at accountability and consumer protections associated with regulatory recognition to operate and compliance (Di Nauta, et al, 2004). Overall, QA is aimed at ensuring social accountability, academic improvement, institutional performance efficiency and effectiveness, value for money, and consumer protection and less commonly deals with values, such as equity, social justice, and democracy (Singh, 2010).

With the proliferation of QAA systems globally, there has been a variety of critiques including arguments that QAA contributes to increased managerialism and distrust in academe; declining academic power; and the growth of audit culture (Singh, 2010) as well as the tension created by the fear of infringement on institutional autonomy and academic freedom (Martin, 2007). Other implications for the proliferation of QAA systems are related to their influence on national competitiveness (Singh, 2010) which is significant in countries' standings in the global economy (Maldonado-Maldonado, 2011). Moreover, Cruz (2009) criticized current QAA models and argued that QA mechanisms in HE should be expanded to assess quality beyond quantifiable products and results to account for relevance, democratization, social equity, development, socioeconomic, cultural and political impacts. Despite criticism of QAA systems, many assume that the impacts of QAA on higher education's internal processes are positive; however, there is limited research on the impacts of QAA. (Harvey, 2006). As such, some scholars have called for more investigation into QAA's effects within HE (Singh, 2010).

Higher Education Quality Assurance in the United States and South Africa

US QAA has undergone major criticism over the last decade due to public concerns about HE affordability, quality, and accountability, leading to calls for a change in the system (Gaston, 2013; Lederman, 2015). In terms of the system's evolution, Singh (2010) noted that the US accreditation system has moved from more improvement focused more on improvement to

accountability focused primarily due to the US political and national/federal framework. Further, Ramirez (2015) noted issues related to US accrediting agencies dual roles as gatekeepers of federal funding from the national government and as mechanisms for improvement, which in many cases leaves accreditors beholden to multiple stakeholders or "masters." Kelchen (2017) argued that the overarching concern with the accreditation system is that USDE recognized agencies are not positioned to do a sufficient job ensuring academic quality, because they are tasked with helping to improve academic quality while also connecting HEIs to federal funding. As a result of this focus on accountability especially from federal and political influences, accreditors often find themselves in a challenging position to go outside of the traditional accreditation expectations, because there is a fear of legal repercussions from the units they accredit (Kelchen, 2017). Furthermore, a 2017 report by the US Government Accountability Office highlighted the following challenges for the US accreditation system: 1.) agencies may be apprehensive to remove an institution's accreditation because it would adversely impact an institution's access to federal funding and potentially lead to the closure of the institution; 2.) accreditation may not provide useful information about academic quality to students; and 3.) agencies are challenged with how to effectively define and measure quality especially in fields where quantifiable measures do not exist (Emrey-Arras, 2017).

Unlike the US, the SA QAA system has undergone much change over the last 25 years. In reexamining education in post-apartheid SA, policy makers gave particular focus to SA's HE system. One of the major criticisms of the HE system was described in a 1997 white paper by the South Africa Department of Education which noted that universities should move away from the "ivory tower" (South Africa, 1997, P.3) mentality. Furthermore, one of the guiding principles articulated included equity and redress. Equity was defined as fair opportunities to enter and succeed in HE and the application of equity happening through the identification of systemic inequalities (based on race, gender, disability, etc) with a need to provide redress (South Africa, 1997). McMillan, Goodman, and Schmid (2016) noted that this 1997 white paper served as a major catalyst for the restructuring of the SA higher education agenda as it promoted the social commitment of universities. A number of transformative changes were articulated including: changes in HE purposes and goals; major restructuring of the HE system; and the development and implementation of new governance, funding, academic, and quality assurance structures (Badat, 2010). Initial efforts at QAA in SA were aligned with other QAA frameworks around the

world including a focus on external measures of quality and accountability; however, one important distinction in the SA QAA was its focus on a transformative agenda intended to address challenges of fragmentation, uneven provision, and racial segregation in HE along with the demand for social and economic justice (Badat, 2010). To carry out the equity priorities and institutional redress, the 1997 white paper noted that the quality assurance, specifically the Council on Higher Education (CHE), would need to be proactive in assisting HEIs in developing their planning capacities, missions, and programming to ensure that the inherited inequalities that existed between white and black institutions were not exacerbated going forward (South Africa, 1997). According to the South African CHE (CHE, 2017), QAA in SA supports HEIs in fulfilling one of their purposes, which is to meet learning and aspirational needs of individuals, so that people are able to better utilize their talents and take advantage of societal opportunities thus helping to achieve "…equity in the distribution of opportunity and achievement among South African citizens" (CHE, 2011, p.12).

Though the transformation agenda has had positive impacts including contributing to an expanded black middle class and opportunities for upward mobility (Reddy, 2006), the overall benefits are debatable. After almost 20 years under the transformation agenda, a review of the system was initiated for a number of reasons (CHE, 2017). For example, many have noted the social reproduction of inequalities continue to exist. As for changing society, Reddy (2006) pointed out that the SA HEIs under the transformation agenda move more slowly in helping to change the historical social relations than other institutions within civil society, and that HEIs tend to reproduce social relations. Singh (2011) noted in a review of literature on social justice efforts in HE, that providing access or increasing enrollments rapidly (massification) does not always reduce inequalities, but massification may result in only benefiting those individuals in society that are already in a place of social advantage. Specifically, Mzangwa (2019) examined the impact of the transformation policy changes and argued that the SA reformation of higher education policies has led to as many material benefits for historically disadvantaged Blacks in terms of access, equity, and participation. Mzangwa (2019) further argued that access could be improved through more equal and standardized university curricula as well as a noting that introducing a common language of instruction for universities could also advance social justice goals. The issue of language in HE was noted, because it is difficult to separate language issues from discussions about transformation and social justice within the South African context. South

Africa has 11 official languages including English, Afrikaans, Zulu, Xhosa and seven other languages (Mzangwa, 2019). As such, lack of attention to language has also been cited as a major challenge to the access and social justice goals of the SA HE agenda. For example, Mwaniki (2012) argued that language is connected to social justice in the context of HE through access. Therefore, Mwaniki (2012) recommended changes to the SA HE agenda to include an updated focus on language. Lastly, another criticism of the transformation agenda and cause for its review, related to more dedicated attention to student success and support. In particular, Scott (2018) argued that the current system lacks a commitment to student success and thus a redesign of the SA HE system should include an explicit focus on student success in order to achieve equity outcomes.

Social Justice

Like quality, there have been many debates surrounding the concept of social justice. The origins of social justice theories are based on the Christian doctrine of providing help to those less fortunate including the sick and oppressed (Ornstein, 2017). The concept has associations with ideas of human and socio-economic rights, access to resources, social inclusion, equity, and human capabilities (Singh, 2011). Discussions about social justice have shifted over time reflecting a move from more secular and materialistic culture discussions to debates about changes and transformations highlighting shifts in people's assumptions about human nature, the role of the state, and society (Singh, 2011). As such, the meaning of social justice has also shifted over time making it a complex and controversial in its meaning and applications (Resicher, 2002).

Despite the debates around social justice, there are at several influential approaches to social justice that have provided a foundational understanding for the concept. In particular, John Rawls' works have been a major influence on the modern concept of social justice in terms of moral and political philosophy and public political discourse. The Rawlsian approach to social justice provided a procedural foundation for social justice that has dominated discussions about social justice in society (McArthur, 2016). Rawls, a philosopher from the liberal tradition, argued for a just liberal society (Wenar, 2021). One of his most discussed works, *A Theory of Justice,* argued that justice is about fairness and articulated two fundamental principles of justice including: 1.) the liberty principle- the right of each person to have basic civil and political

liberties so that one's autonomy as a person is protected, and 2.) the difference principle-
wanting to live in a society that prioritizes improving the condition of poor people (Rawls, 1971;
Crook, 2002). Rawls' theory provided a procedural framework for how to govern modern
society while also explaining the significance of cooperative arrangements that benefit the more
and less advantaged in society; equal opportunity; and personal and political liberties (Garret,
2015). Furthermore, according to Nussbaum (2001) and Alexander (2008), Rawls offered an
alternative and challenge to 18th and 19th century utilitarianism, which failed to give sufficient
attention to justice and rights while often treating people as a means to an end regarding general
social well-being. Additionally, Rawls provided explicitness to one of the most valuable legacies
of the liberal tradition-- "the idea that a person has a dignity and worth that social structures
should not be permitted to violate" (Nussbaum, 2001, para. 8).

Despite the influence and legacy of Rawls' works, they were not without criticism. Some
have attacked the difference principle, noting that it is unfair to take away from people who have
earned or that this principle focuses on income and wealth in society. Additionally, as an
alternative to Rawls, some have advocated that social justice be viewed from a capability's
standpoint. Instead of seeing people as equals making a bargain or a social contract, it may be
better to think of individuals as people with varying degrees of capacity and disability, who have
diverse relationships of interdependency with each other (Nussbaum, 2001). The basic claim of
the capabilities approach is that people should ask "what people are able to do and what lives
they are able to lead" when thinking about social justice (Robeyns, 2017).

Historically, the capabilities approach was pioneered by Amartya Sen, an economist-
philosopher, and further developed by philosopher, Martha Nussbaum as a distinct approach to
addressing social justice issues (Alexander, 2008). Sen first introduced the capability approach
in the 1970's and elaborated on it in subsequent works with the *Development as Freedom* (Sen,
1999), one of the most comprehensive accounts of the approach. Sen's approach was based
criticism of utilitarianism and resourcism (where people's well-being is based on possession of
general-purpose resources in order to have a good life). Sen's criticism of resourcism was also a
criticism of the Rawls' fair distribution of goods principle. This approach defined justice relative
to one's well-being and the extent to which one is able to be and do, based on what an individual
finds valuable such as one's quality of life (Nussbaum, 2007; Wilson-Strydom, 2015). This

represented a shift from focusing on "means" to "ends" and moved beyond a focus on goods and services (Rajapakse, 2015). Sen (1999) defined capabilities as the *real freedoms* that individuals possess to achieve their potential doings and beings (as cited in Robeyns & Morten, 2023). Though Sen's capabilities approach gained support, many philosophers found gaps or were dissatisfied with the vagueness of the framework and subsequently sought to build out the capabilities approach further. In particular, Martha Nussbaum developed one of the most systematic and influential theories based on Sen's capabilities approach (Wells, 2012). Nussbaum (2003) argued that Sen's approach provided a general outline for what societies should strive for; however, the approach was vague and lacked a commitment to substance. To mitigate the vagueness of Sen's concept of freedom, Nussbaum's contributions to the capabilities approach included a list of ten fundamental capabilities based on dignity rather than Sen's focus on freedoms (Wells, 2012). This list provided a minimum level of capability for what society could be, not only for social justice issues, but for gender issues as well (Nussbaum, 2003).

Alexander (2008) argued that the intent of capabilities theorist is argue that social justice is about creating the greatest possible conditions for the realization of basic capabilities for all people. Despite the approach's popularity with scholars, some have noted criticisms. For example, Robeyns (2017) major critique of Sens's original capability theory was the absence of specific capabilities that can be used for all versions of capabilities theories and their applications. Additionally, this approach has been criticized for being too individualistic; not paying enough attention to groups; nor does it pay enough attention to collective features for society, such as social structures, social norms, and institutions (Robeyns, 2017). Despite the criticisms of the capabilities approach, McArthur (2016) argued that this approach highlights the distinction between procedural notions of social justice and the lived realities of social justice. Furthermore, Roebeyns (2017) argued that one of the most significant contributions that the capabilities approach adds to conversations about social justice is that it prompts alternative questions and focuses on different dimensions when making observations or when gathering relevant data to make evaluations or judgements.

In addition to the Rawlsian and the capabilities approaches to social justice, critical theorists have also contributed an alternative perspective on the understanding of social justice. Critical theory based on the Marxist perspective is concerned with understanding power and

inequality in society, and theorists aim to change and critique social structures within society which includes an emancipatory commitment to social change (McArthur, 2021). As such, they are less concerned about a specific definition of social justice but rather looking beyond the surface to get an understanding despite agreement around terminology. In particular, Axel Honneth and Nancy Fraser have been two influential voices in recent times that have furthered the discussion of social justice from the critical theorist perspective through their scholarly debates. They have contributed to developing elements that allow for a better understanding of reality through viewpoints that are committed to social change (Baptista, 2020). Their debate has primarily centered around the importance of recognition as a foundational element versus both recognition and redistribution being at the center of critical theory. For Honneth (Fraser & Honneth, 2003), recognition is a foundational concept from which aspects of social justice emerge (McArthur, 2021) which involves three different forms: love or the loving care of others- a powerful emotional attachment for one person to their significant others; respect- all people should enjoy equal respect for just being human beings under the law; and esteem (or merit) – value for everyone's contribution to society has an equal chance to be valued or an equal opportunity to earn esteem (Fraser & Honneth, 2003).

Alternatively, Fraser originally argued for a concept of social justice based on the dual concepts of recognition (cultural) and redistribution (economic) unlike Honneth (Baptista, 2020). Recognition involves the identification and acknowledgment of the claims of historically marginalized groups, and redistribution refers to the access to resources and the potential outcomes that arise from this (Cazden, 201). Fraser (2007b & 2009) later added the third concept of representation (political) to her approach to social justice, advocating for participatory parity as a result of this multidimensional approach (Wilson-Strydom, 2015). Fraser (2005) argued that debates about social justice traditionally focused on economic distribution and cultural recognition alone are not capable of addressing social justice problems in a globalizing age. As such, she acknowledged that her original theory did not go far enough and included representation (political) as a third dimension. She noted that "the political… furnishes the stage on which struggles for distribution and recognition are played out" (Fraser, 2007b p.256). The political dimension or representation refers to the rights of individuals and groups to have their voices heard in debates about social justice and injustice and to actively participate in decision making (Cazden, 2012) which echoes Biesta's (2015) perspectives on agency in education.

Fraser (2007b & 2009) argued that the political dimension is inherent in all claims of recognition and redistribution and "T [t]hus, no redistribution or recognition without representation (Fraser, 2009, p.259)." All three dimensions are important for social justice and are mutually entwined with each having a reciprocal influence on the other (Fraser, 2007b).

Social Justice and Education

Social justice in education is notably reflected in the works of Paulo Freire. As noted early in the discussion regarding the purposes of education, education is a process for emancipation from oppression and provides an opportunity for people to reach their potential (Freire, 1996). Much of the literature on HE and social justice has focused on how issues of equity and social justice are addressed through inputs/imports (e.g., students, factory, etc.) by looking at the composition of HEIs via staff and student compositions and whether they are representative of the larger society (Brennan & Naidoo, 2008). In particular, much of the literature focuses on participation or access. Participation is important due to its long-term implications for one's life chances. As such, this is a key part of HE in serving its role as an exporter of equity and social justice to society (Brennan & Naidoo, 2008). Singh (2011) argued that social justice efforts, particularly inclusion strategies primarily target economic growth, human capital development and competitiveness objectives rather than other social priorities. Wilson-Strydom (2015) argued there are gaps in the current approach to social justice in HE. Alternatively to imports to HE, Brennan and Naidoo (2008) argued that little attention has been given to HE as an export and how it contributes to a just and fair society. As a result, they advocated for more comparative research within and between countries on different ways that HEIs contribute to the achievement of social justice and equity demands. Moreover, Miller (1999) offered a broad definition for discussing social justice in the context of HE, arguing that social justice is "how the good and bad things in life should be distributed among the members of a human society" (Miller 1999, p. 1). Additionally, Wilson-Strydom (2015) using Miller's (1999) expanded an additional definition for social justice in the context of higher education. They noted that social justice as the following:

> [S]social justice is about understanding and interrogating how different individuals or
> groups are faring in comparison with others in a specific context (such as a university) or

more broadly in society. This often involves the consideration of distributional issues, both in terms of distribution of advantages and disadvantages (Wilson-Strydom, 2015, p. 145).”

On the other hand, the works of critical theorists such as Fraser have been used to discuss social justice within the context of HE, relying less on a single definition of social justice rather more of an understanding. In particular, McArthur (2021) argued that the view of HE's role is narrowly conceptualized outside of its economic role and that it is often separate from the social realm. Specifically, McArthur (2021) discussed social justice and its role in assessment in HE using both Honneth and Fraser's works as reference points.

Social Justice and Quality Assurance and Accreditation

Much less popular in the literature is the intersection between social justice and quality assurance and accreditation. Continuous quality improvement and accountability seem to occupy a large amount of the literature on QA; however, there is acknowledgement that new models should be explored. Kristoffersen (2019) highlighted that there is a desire within conversations about quality to move the discussion of quality beyond just assessment to linking quality to relevance and resources (Hazelkorn & Gibson, 2017; Eaton, 2015). Henard (2016) argued that HEIs should be more socially engaged at levels of society and that QAA should hold institutions accountable for social engagement. As noted earlier by Henard (2016), institutions should focus more on the "third mission" which is that of their social responsibility and engagement to meet societal needs; however, this area is not often explored by QA frameworks and may actually pose challenges. Despite challenges, some have argued that HEIs have a social responsibility to address not only the economic needs of society but also societal problems faced by communities (Cruz, 2009). As such, QA mechanisms, specifically accreditation, should be based on criteria that account for context, relevance, social equity, and local and regional development (Cruz, 2009). Furthermore, instead of focusing on consumer protections and accountability, Singh (2010, 2011) argued that QAA systems should be revised to account for national social justice priorities. Routinely, social justice concerns are not included in consumer-based concepts of accountability which characterize many policy recommendations related to HE quality; however, QA is a key part of the HE governance in many countries where social justice efforts are being targeted at addressing diverse types of inequality (Singh, 2010, 2011). Specifically, Prisăcariu

(2014) advocated for access and equality outcomes to be incorporated into QAA evaluation criteria and policies. Lange and Singh (2010) noted that there have been infrequent attempts by QAA systems to connect quality with social concerns such as equity, social justice, and democracy within the expanded understanding of social accountability. Examples include affirmative action and diversity issues featured in US accreditation and social justice and social transformation criteria within the South African QAA system (Lange and Singh as cited in Singh, 2010) with these issues being highly politicized.

Furthermore, in discussing social awareness or social justice with QAA, Pijanowski and Brady (2021) argued that no other segment of education has been more politicized than has been related to incorporating social justice and the development of standards for professional practice and preparation. For example, Johnson and Johnson (2007) and Heybach (2009) noted the political controversy around a US programmatic accrediting agency that attempted to incorporate and define social justice into its policies. They noted the political pressures that were received by the agency during the recognition process with the USDE that ultimately led to the agency's removal of the term social justice from its glossary due to the possibility of not being re-recognized by the USDE; however, the agency later added social justice to its standards in 2013 (Alsup & Miller, 2014).

Despite the potential political and regulatory challenges, some have argued that QA agencies through their standards have an opportunity to advance social justice outcomes. For example, Rubaii (2016) noted that accreditation standards have the ability to advance social equity goals. Specifically, Nora (2021) argued for accreditation standards in the context of medical education to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts within schools by promoting standards that facilitate schools describing their efforts; considering additional continuous quality improvements and ways to achieve their institutional goals around DEI (Nora, 2021). Despite discussion about new models of QAA, thus far, there seems to be a small but growing body of literature dedicated to the envisioning QAA frameworks to include social justice notions and limited discussion on how QAA frameworks may actually integrate social justice concerns into their oversight practices.

Theoretical Underpinnings for the Study

There are a number of theories and understandings of quality and social justice. This study looks at important concepts in quality, quality assurance in HE, and social justice which have numerous theories dedicated to them respectively; however, I chose to use Nancy Fraser's three-dimensional approach of social justice as a theoretical lens for the study. As noted previously and illustrated below in Figure 2.2, the three dimensions include redistribution (economic), recognition (cultural), and representation (political) (with each element reinforcing the other). Fraser's (2009) framework of social justice provided a solid philosophical and normative base and an opportunity for a more practical application in efforts to intervene in social issues. Additionally, it allows for the opportunity to provide critiques to institutional injustices (Fraser, 2007a) and challenge existing systems.

Figure 2.2 Nancy Fraser's Three-Dimensional Framework of Social Justice

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the literature from the purposes of HE to theoretical underpinnings associated with the concepts of QA and social justice and a brief description of the concepts within the contexts of the US and SA. The role of HE and how to assess quality have been covered extensively in academic literature; however, less attention has been given to linkages between more socially (intrinsic) purposes of HE and what that means for assessing quality within HE. Specifically, social justice has long been a concept discussed within the context of education; and traditional models of QAA associated with public accountability having been extensively covered. Although the relationship between social justice and QAA in HE is less explored, this study is intended to contribute to body of knowledge on how QAA frameworks can move beyond traditional accountability models to facilitate more attention to

social justice concerns using Fraser's (2009) three-dimensional framework of social justice as a

critical lens. The following chapter will include a detailed account of the research process,

highlighting: the study's aims, research design, and other key considerations.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

Chapter Overview

This chapter provides a description of the approach I used in the study to answer the research questions and the justification for making various choices throughout the research process. Specifically, this chapter includes details and rationale about the research design, methods used, and sampling. Additionally, the chapter discusses the ethical considerations associated with this research and ways in which those considerations were mitigated. The chapter ends with a summary and brief preview of chapter 4.

Study Aim

The purpose of this research study was to examine how QAA frameworks aid HEIs in the mitigation of social justice issues. It is intended to contribute to conversations about how traditional notions of QA may be challenged and how to contribute improvements in HE QAA that link quality to more socially relevant outcomes and that go beyond traditional public accountability frameworks. The research questions outlined in chapter 1 provided the basis for how I approached the study. They were developed as a result of my initial interest in the topic and as an iterative exercise throughout the research process. The following sections outline my philosophical understanding of social science research and present the research design I used for study.

Research Paradigm and Philosophy

Research paradigms lay the foundation for one's inquiry by guiding how things are done and establishing formal sets of practice for how one approaches inquiry (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In contemplating the various research paradigms, the pragmatic philosophy resonated most with me and subsequently guided this research study. This approach promotes intelligent and reflective action by the educational practitioner (Biesta & Burbules, 2003). This aligned with my practice-based research goals and the study's research questions. Under this approach, values played an important role in guiding my decisions regarding the research process. Specifically, my values, beliefs, and doubts are informed by my experiences and positionality (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). Because this paradigm supports the use of the best approach to finding solutions to problems, this provided me flexibility in selecting a research design and methods that I thought

would be most reasonable to examine the study' research questions (Muijis, 2011). In addition, during my inquiry, critical theory has become more prominent and relevant to me, because of the social justice issues that unfolded globally and especially in the US which influenced the research. As such, my involvement as a practitioner with HE QAA frameworks coupled with my underlying beliefs and values led me to develop a research flexible design.

Research Approach and Rationale

As previously noted, I adopted a pragmatic approach to this study, since this approach is often used to examine real world problems and allows flexibility in choosing methods (Muijis, 2011). I used mixed methods combining both qualitative and quantitative research techniques including semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and a survey for the study. A key component of the mixed methods research design methodology is the identification of the rationale for selecting this approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The use of mixed methods allowed me the opportunity to use results from one method to inform another method which is noted by Greene et.al (1989) as the development rationale. For example, I thought it would be useful for the initial qualitative results from the interviews to inform how I developed the survey and the subsequent focus group questions. Based on my familiarity with the QAA community in the US, I wanted to use the interviews with a smaller group of individuals to get a better understanding of the nuances and possible surprises prior to gathering more generalized information with the survey. I felt that the interviews would provide me with important context and background prior to asking information in the survey. Specifically, I chose to conduct the interviews first to help me with developing questions and areas that I wanted to explore with the survey and the focus groups and determine if I needed to adjust any of the subsequently planned data collection methods. For example, I hoped the interviews would give me an opportunity to test out questions and also help determine which questions or areas would be more problematic or not as appropriate or useful in the survey. Given the interactive nature of the interviews, I hoped they would provide an opportunity for participants to talk through some of the issues around QAA and social justice in detail and depth which would also allow me to think more carefully about the subject matter and help me gain more perspective than beginning with the survey prior to the interviews. Interviews and focus groups are excellent methods to gain a deeper understanding about the topic under investigation and these were important to collect rich

data (Turner, 2010, Krueger (2014)). Additionally, I wanted to learn about the specifics of agencies and processes from interviewees and then follow-up on some of the same questions and more questions from the larger population in the survey.

Moreover, the mixed methods approach provided an opportunity to leverage the strength of both methods. Specifically, I wanted to corroborate the contextual information collected in the interviews with the survey findings to see if the qualitative findings would be consistent with results from a larger population and to compare findings among different characteristics of the US QAA community. The focus groups were used in part to corroborate the interview and survey results. Finally, as Schutt (2015) suggested, mixed methods should be considered when research questions are original or complex. The study's research questions were original, since, as noted in chapter 2, there is limited research on the relationship between social justice and HE QA.

Research Design

Research designs act as the frameworks for action connecting research questions to the execution of research. They serve as the guide post for the research approach, and the methods of data collection and analysis is a way that helps to combine relevance to the research purpose with effective procedures (Durrheim, 2006). For the study, I chose a flexible research design outlined in Figure 3.1, because it reflected my pragmatic orientation to achieving my research aims and allowed me to make revisions during the research process as needed based on technical or practical considerations.
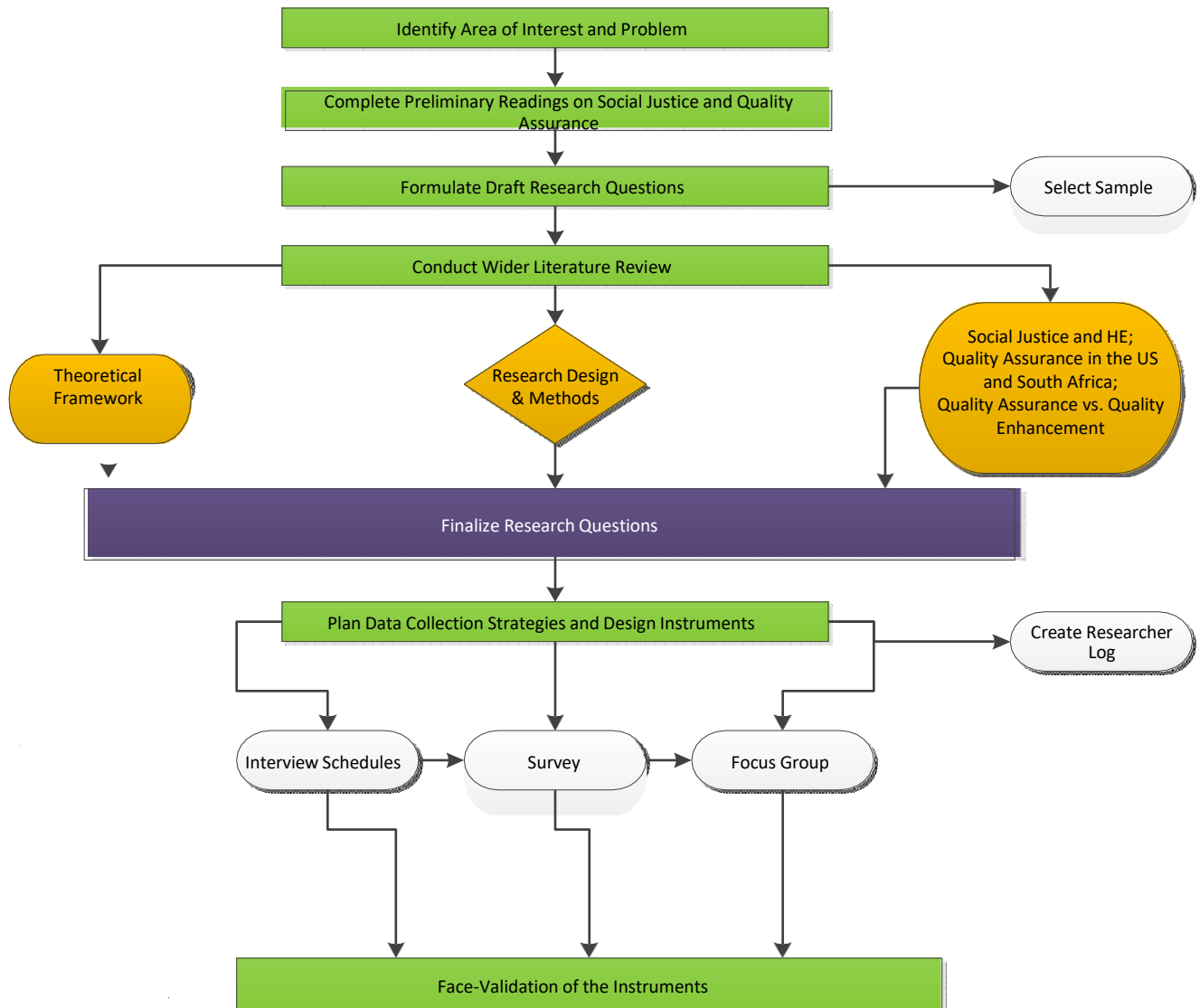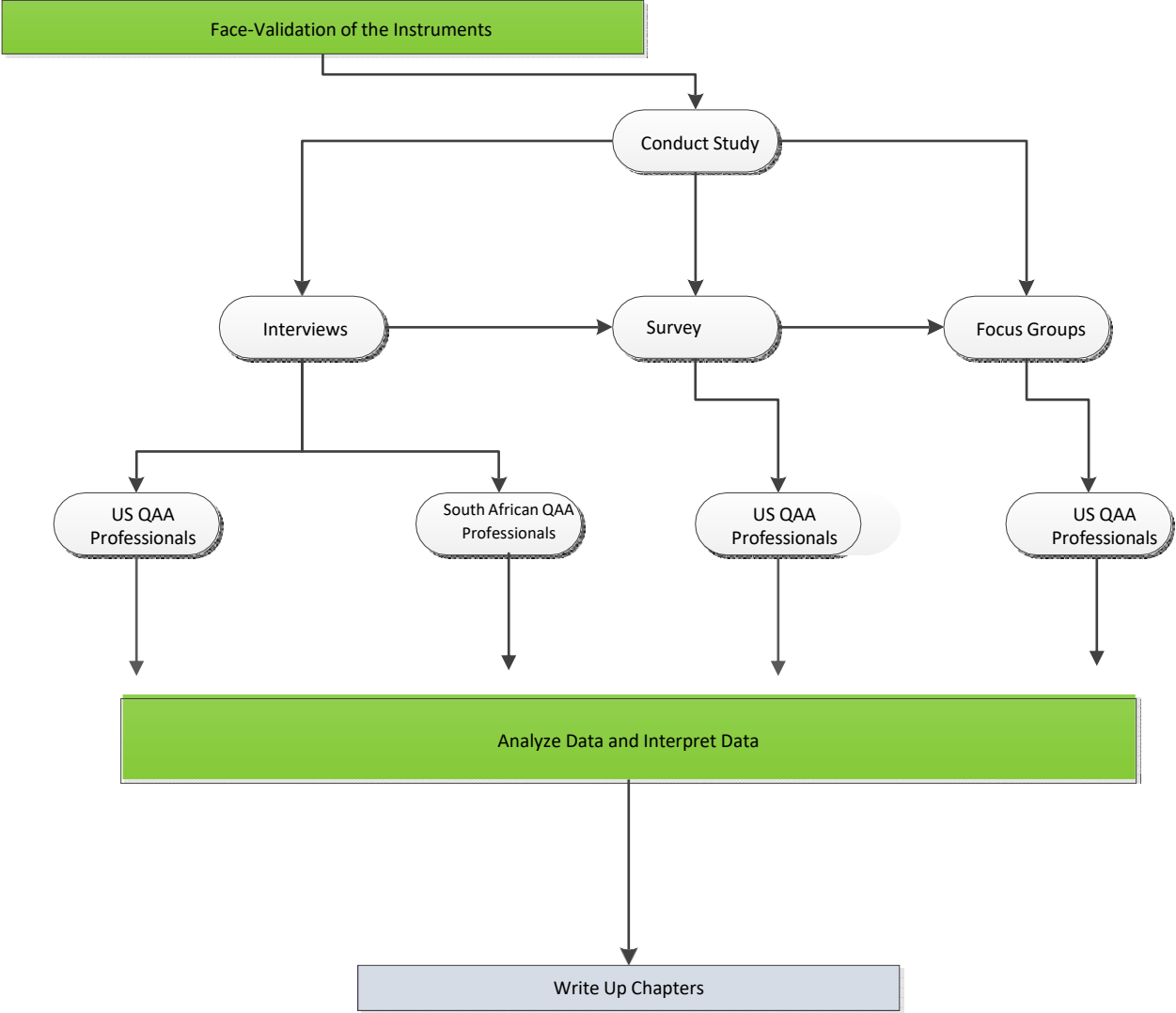
Figure 3.1 Research Design

Sampling

The purpose of sampling is to draw a representative estimate from a larger population based on one's research question(s) in order to make inferences about that larger population. Size, the representativeness, parameters, access, and sampling strategy should be considered when determining the sample (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2002). Purposive sampling is consistent with exploratory and qualitative research and allows the researcher to use their judgement in deliberatively selecting participants due to specific qualities (Etikan, Musa, & Alksassim, 2016). As such, this study utilized purposive sampling which was guided by my existing knowledge about of QAA in the US and SA.

The US was chosen as the geographic focus of the study for a number of reasons. First, my career has been primarily based within the US QAA context; thus, I wanted to produce research that could provide some guidance to US accrediting agencies. Next, since my career was based in the US, I had familiarity with and access to potential data sources. Further, the US provided the potential for a rich data source, since the US has various types and well-established accrediting agencies (approximately 80 agencies recognized by USDE) along with a long-standing quality assurance history compared to other countries. In addition to the US, in an attempt to provide more context for how social justice priorities are operationalized within a QAA context and for potential insights, I also interviewed participants from similar agencies in South Africa. I did this in order to gather data from individuals that had been involved in the actual work of aligning social justice priorities with national QA practices as is the case in the SA context. Based on my professional knowledge and assumptions, I was curious to learn about the SA efforts, since national efforts of this sort were uncommon in the US context. As such, I wanted to use the study to gather information about what has been done by other quality assurance systems outside of the US to learn from their experiences. South Africa was chosen because the country was transparent and intentional in attempting to infuse social justice priorities, specifically related to addressing racial disparities, into its QAA efforts after the fall of apartheid. As noted in chapter 2, there is a small amount of research about the relationship between social justice and QAA and limited examples of how countries have worked to implement such alignments; however, in the limited literature available, the case of South Africa has been subject of discussion. As such, I wanted to gather data first-hand in an attempt to better

understand what efforts have been made elsewhere to understand links between QAA and social justice as well as help support responses to the study's research questions in the context of the US. Additionally, I felt that the social contexts of both countries around social justice issues related to race and civil rights were comparable. Based on these variables, SA was chosen for more perspective for data collection and from a practical standpoint to glean any lessons learned to assist in the study's objective of learning about how and what more could be done to assist US agencies accrediting agencies with being more engage with social justice as a part of their quality assurance efforts. Two major data sources for samples were selected from US QAA professionals and SA QAA professionals. An overview of the sampling for the qualitative and quantitive methods is outlined in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2 Overview of Study Sampling.

Data Source (Population)	Method/Sample Size

US QAA Professionals	• *Qualitative*
	     o Interviews (N=8)
	     o Focus Groups (N=13)
	        ▪ Group 1 (7)
	        ▪ Group 2 (6)
	 • *Quantitative*
	     o Survey (N=48)

SA QAA Professionals	• *Qualitative* o Interviews (N=4)

US Quality Assurance and Accreditation Professionals

As noted, the US accreditation community was chosen as a data source for a number of reasons, one of which was due to the well-established history of QAA and the variety of agencies that exist in the US. In reflecting on the research questions, I collected data directly from individuals involved in the QAA process since much of the work and business is done by individuals staffing or volunteering for agencies, who could provide insights about normative and practical issues related to the study's research questions. Participants were identified based on their affiliation with US accrediting agencies and if they were associated with a QAA membership agencies. Based on the website reviews and my knowledge of individuals in the QAA community, individuals were identified who held professional or volunteer positions within the community and were deemed to be knowledgeable about HE QAA standards, policies,

and procedures (SPPs). Sample participants were involved in interviews (N=8), focus groups (N=13) and/or the survey (N= 48). The following includes a more detailed description of the samples and rationale for participant selection for the primary data collection methods:

- **Interviews.** Eight participants were interviewed from US agencies. All participants interviewed held executive level positions in their respective organizations.
  - o Three participants were from three different QAA membership organizations. These organizations are recognized as accreditation membership associations globally or within the US. Senior representatives were interviewed to gain context and perspectives on the study's research questions from broader viewpoints since their roles allow them to have access and regular interactions with many QAA agencies. As such, these representatives were thought to be able to speak in general terms about agencies and perhaps provide points of comparisons among different agencies. All three organizations' membership consists of, but are not limited to, US-based accrediting agencies.
  - o Three participants were from US programmatic/specialized agencies that had mission centered on public service or public welfare missions. These agencies were identified based on a preliminary review of agency websites that showed that social justice issues could possibly be a focus area for their agencies. Participants were selected, because they would be able to provide insights from agencies using social justice in their work.
  - o Two participants were from US institutional accrediting agencies including a national and a regional agency. As of 2020, the USDE no longer uses the distinction between national and regional accreditors. These agencies were representative of the various institutional accreditors in the US with diverse university/institutional membership bases, and because they represented the different types of institutional accreditors recognized by the USDE. These participants were chosen to provide macro-level perspectives from the agencies that look at the holistic operations of institutions level (i.e., a university's mission alignment).

- **Focus Groups**. Thirteen individuals participated in two separate focus groups (seven in one and six in the other). All participants held senior level positions at their respective accrediting agencies. Participants were identified based on their responses to a question in the study's survey. Survey participants were asked about their willingness to participate in a focus group on the same topic as the survey. If yes, respondents were asked to provide their email addresses. Based on the survey responses, 20 participants were invited to participate in the virtual focus groups via email and asked to provide their availability to participate in an approximately 1.5- hour interview via Zoom, a video-conferencing tool. Based on availability, 13 participants were confirmed and divided into two groups. Each group included similar representation to get various perspectives while also attempting to be consistent (including a mix of agency type and agency discipline focus – e.g., healthcare, business, science). For example, each group included a representative from an institutional accrediting agency and a programmatic agency. This mix allowed me to collect data from people with differing perspectives based on their organizational affiliation, positions, and disciplines regarding the research questions and to learn about future areas of research beyond this study. Additionally, power differentials were taken into consideration in determining the group composition. According to Krueger (2014), power differential or levels of expertise among members should be noted because it helps with ensuring that all participants feel comfortable participating.

- **Survey.** Approximately, 300 surveys were emailed to individuals and 48 individuals responded (16% response rate). Surveys were sent to middle to senior level staff professionals and agency board chairs (volunteers). Using the guidelines established by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) for determining a random sample size, I estimated that the total QAA population including volunteer decisions makers and senior management or above staff positions from US QAA organizations to be approximately 1,200, so according to Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) guidelines, approximately 291 for the minimum sample size. The general idea is that the larger number of participants the more reliable the data. (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2002). After determining the sample size, an email distribution list was developed by reviewing individual accreditation agency websites and using the USDE accreditation information pages which list the contact

information for key accreditation personnel and email addresses for all USDE recognized accrediting agencies. Additionally, names and email addresses were identified and compiled from a review of the list of recognized accreditors on public documents found on the CHEA website. Individual websites were reviewed to identify key individuals in management positions or above of staff individuals at agencies and the key volunteer positions (e.g., chair persons of the board of directors or commission or decision-making entity).

SA Quality Assurance and Accreditation Professionals.

Four participants were interviewed from the SA QAA community. As noted, SA was chosen as a data source in order to gather data first hand regarding the development, implementation and lessons learned regarding the country's QA system and its alignment with social justice efforts. I wanted to gain insights about normative and practical issues related to the study's research questions. Participants were identified based on their affiliation with SA QAA agencies that are primarily responsible either institutional and/or programmatic oversight and implementation of quality guidelines in SA. Overall, there were not as many agencies in SA compared to the US. For example, CHE and SAQA are the two agencies responsible for QA at the national level and numerous ETQA agencies that accredit educational providers by discipline. As such, there were not as many representatives selected for interviews from agencies compared to the number of US participants selected since there was not as many varieties of agencies conducting QA or accreditation activities. I selected one representative from CHE; one from SAQA; and two individuals were selected from two different ETQAs. Individuals were identified who held professional/senior positions within their respective agencies. In particular, the agencies selected were comparable to accrediting agencies including focus on either institutional or programmatic/discipline oversight.

Data Collection Methods and/or Strategies

As noted earlier, a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods was used in this study. The data collection was conducted in the following order: semi-structured interviews; survey; and focus groups (See Figure 3.1). As noted, the interviews were conducted as the first step of the data collection process in order to help me gain perspective and rich data from the interviews in order to develop the survey and focus group questions. These methods are

described in the following sections beginning with a description of the qualitative phases followed by an account of the quantitative methods.

Qualitative Research Methods

Qualitative research methods are typically employed attempting to explore the meanings of social phenomena as experienced by individuals in their natural environment or daily context (Malterud, 2001). Researchers seek to provide opportunities and environments for participants to express themselves freely and typically generate rich detailed data from a small number of cases and methods employed are open-ended and exploratory (Polit 2010; Malterud, 2001). The following sections describe the qualitative methods used and the rationale for their use.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews are a way for researchers to gather information from people about their perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and feelings (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). For this study, interviews allowed participants to talk about issues in a way that they may not have been able to do through surveys and allowed me to obtain in-depth information from participants regarding their experiences and viewpoints (Turner, 2010) on the relationship between social justice and quality assurance. In particular, this study utilized semi-structured interviews which allowed for specifics to be addressed about my research questions while also allowing for the interviewees to shed new light on the research topic and provide a facilitated space for exploration of contextual influences on the interviewees' narratives (Galletta, 2013). I used open-ended questions, so that I could better understand the different social context and dynamics about different organizations. Specifically, semi-structured interviews were used instead of a structured or unstructured style, since I had some familiarity with the topics, and they allowed the interviews to have a more conversational flow. According to Fylan (2005), this approach works better than structured interviews when the research questions are complex and unfamiliar.

On the other hand, interviews have some disadvantages. They have the potential to raise questions regarding the validity and reliability, due bias and subjectivity introduced by the interviewer (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2002). For this study, because I had experience with the subject matter and familiarity with some of the participants, there was the potential for bias during the interview process. As such, I was always aware of this potential issue and worked not

to make assumptions regarding the interviews and adhered to a reflexive approach during the process. For example, my own knowledge and ideas about the field led me to believe that QAA related to social justice is a nuanced and particularly newer subject for QA professionals in concrete ways. As such, an assumption that I had going into the interviews was that participants would have varied insights and opinions in discussing social justice in relation to the professional community. Despite possible challenges of conducting interviews, I felt the advantages outweighed the disadvantages and that interviews were an appropriate and practical data collection strategy to obtain in-depth information versus using other data collection methods. The interviews were conducted as the first step of data collection.

Open-Ended Survey Questions

As noted, this study included a survey as a data collection method that followed the interviews. The survey was primarily used for quantitive data collection, consisting of 10 to 14 questions. One to four questions solicited open-ended or qualitative responses. The open-ended questions allowed respondents to answer in open or free-text format based on their knowledge about their QAA agencies. Furthermore, O'Cathain and Thomas (2004) noted that open responses may be used to corroborate answers to closed questions, provide some confirmation that the survey is valid, or highlight problems with specific questions. More detailed information about the survey is included in the quantitive section of this chapter.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are recommended for researchers who are seeking to familiarize themselves with a new field; they provide an opportunity for brainstorming; and they save time for the researcher, since multiple perspectives can be captured in one setting (Longhurst, 2003). They provide the opportunity the researcher to explore ideas in a non-threatening environment and glean insights from a range of participants with similar backgrounds (Plummer, 2017; Longhurst, 2003). In particular, Krueger (2014) noted that a researcher may want to use a focus group for several reasons including, but not limited to, when looking for a range of thoughts from people about an issue or policy; needing information to help understand previous data collected; or wanting to test ideas, products, policies, and/or materials. Based on these reasons, I conducted two focus groups to: gather additional insights about specific preliminary research findings and

other ideas about the relationship between QAA and social justice; solicit feedback on a newly

developed "how to" guidelines to assist QAA agencies in facilitating the mitigation

of social justice issues following the survey; and help identify potential areas for future research.

Implementation of Research Qualitative Methods

Semi-Structured Interviews

       Preparation. In preparation for the interviews, I developed an interview protocol.
According to Castillo-Montoya (2016), the interview protocol is an inquiry tool that supports the
interview or inquiry-based conversation related to a study's aims. It should promote conversation
by including: 1.) interview questions that are stated differently from the study's research
questions; 2.) an organization that reflects social rules of typical conversation; 3.) different types
of questions; and 4.) a script with potential follow-up and prompt questions. For this study, the
interview protocol was based on a review of organizational websites and documents; the
preliminary literature review; my prior knowledge of the subject matter; Fraser's (2009) concepts
of redistribution, recognition, and representation; and the study's research questions. The
interview protocol served as my guide and script. The protocol included: a short introduction
(about me as student and professional, study aims, and research questions); references to
background documents and websites that I used to prepare for the interview (this was included in
case I needed to specifically refer to something during the interviews); 10 to 12 open-ended
questions (some tailored specifically to the agency or interviewee's affiliation); and next steps
about the study's timeline (**Appendix 1- Sample Interview Protocol**).

       Face Validation. Face validation refers to the informal review of a research technique to
assess the clarity, comprehensibility, and appropriateness of the research tool for the target-group
by non- experts (Bhandari, 2023). Prior to interviews, I shared a draft of the complete interview
protocol with my primary supervisor for review and validation. My supervisor provided minor
feedback which I incorporated in order to strengthen the effectiveness of the protocol.

       Implementation. Both US and SA participants were invited via email to participate in an
approximately 1-hour interview via Zoom or in-person. Upon acceptance of the invitation,
participants were sent a second email to confirm participation and availability and then sent a
meeting invitation which included the participant information sheet and the participant consent
form. Participants were asked to sign and return the consent forms prior to their scheduled

interviews. Signed consent forms were collected from each interviewee prior to the start of each interview.

In conducting the interviews, I used the interview protocol to guide conversations with participants. All interviews began with brief introductions, a confirmation of consent, and an overview of the study, and I provided interviewees with the opportunity to ask any questions. Additionally, I reviewed the informed consent procedures and acknowledged that the session was being recorded with their consent. At the conclusion of each interview, I thanked participants, provided them with the tentative timeline of the study, reassured them of the steps used to anonymize the data and confirmed if they were comfortable with me following up, if I had any additional questions.

After each interview, I updated the interview protocol based on the flow and dynamics of the previous interviews. Questions were slightly revised based on the previous interview(s). Additionally, the questions were slightly modified to reflect specific questions (related directly to the participant's agency affiliation or context), but most questions were general for each interviewee. Interview questions were open-ended and allowed for follow-up questions to be asked.

The first round of interviews was conducted with participants from the US and then participants from SA. The interviews were conducted in this order to get a better idea for the US landscape, since US agencies were the primary focus of the study. Additionally, it provided me with background information for the preparation of the SA interviews. US interviews were conducted from December 2019 through March 2020, and the SA interviews were conducted from May 2020 to June 2020. Two US interviews were conducted in-person, and all other interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom due to the participant's geographic location, availability, and/or the COVID global pandemic.

Once US interviews were completed in March 2020, I sent follow-up emails to the US interviewees in June 2020 to see what, if any, updates they would like to share, since their interviews had taken place. US interviews took place before the COVID pandemic was at its height, as well as, the social unrest in the US precipitated by the killing of George Floyd in May 2020, an African American man, by police. Floyd's death sparked outrage, protests, and responses in the US and internationally to address issues of systemic racism and injustice for

blacks in America (Dreyer et al, 2020). I requested that participants respond in email to let me know if they had time for a follow-up conversation. Two participants responded to my email. One person responded via email, and I conducted a 45-minute follow-up conversation with the other participant.

Focus Groups

Two focus group sessions were conducted in mid-September 2020 during the same week as the final data collection method. Each session lasted approximately 1.5 hours. Due to the timing and participant availability, the focus groups were conducted shortly after the closing of the survey. I wanted to collect data while social justice issues were top of mind given the conversations regarding, HE and the QAA community's reactions to the summer 2020 social unrest in the US.

Preparation. In preparation for the focus groups, participants were sent via email: consent forms; participant information sheets; Zoom log-in information; an agenda for the session; a PowerPoint presentation, illustrating the "how-to "social justice guidelines; and potential questions for consideration regarding the guidelines. Specifically, the agenda for the focus group sessions was developed to guide the conversation and help keep the session on track.

Face Validation. In order to validate the techniques used in this step, I piloted the plan for the focus groups including the organization, guideline questions, and PowerPoint slides with two HE colleagues not involved in the study and my supervisor for feedback. Based on their feedback, I made slight adjustments to questions in order to ensure there was clarity in the questions and logical organization for the management of the focus group sessions.

Implementation. The agenda, PowerPoint presentation, and potential questions for consideration about the "how-to" guidelines were provided to the groups one day in advance of their sessions. This was done to provide the participants with an opportunity to think more deeply about the concepts to be presented at the time of the session (**Appendix 2- Focus Group Agenda**).

Focus groups are intended to elicit participants comprehensive views by directing what and how topics are discussed. As such, the facilitator serves an important role for the effectiveness of a focus group, and in some cases, the moderator should be someone who participants can identify with so that their trust can be easily gained by participants (Millward, 1995). I acted as the facilitator for the focus group sessions, due to my familiarity with the

subject matter and ability to identify as a professional member of the QAA community. The sessions were conducted via Zoom and recorded, so, as the facilitator, I did not need to act as recorder, and I closely followed an interview protocol. The protocol included: an introduction (welcome and study aims), questions, topic areas, and reminders for the group. Specifically, the focus group questions were based on the study's research questions and preliminary findings, as well as related to the "how to" social justice guidelines.

At the start of each session, I reviewed the purpose of the focus group, consent form, and participant selection criteria and requested that participants briefly introduce themselves. The PowerPoint presentation was used to help facilitate the sessions. The slides included preliminary findings and a graphic representation of the "how-to" guidelines. The preliminary findings included selected results from the interviews and the survey, because, at the time of the focus groups, the complete data analysis was not finalized. Participants were given the opportunity to react to the preliminary results and discuss amongst themselves. Participants were asked questions about the "how-to" guidelines related to their clarity, potential utility, practicality, and overall usefulness to organizations. The focus groups concluded with me thanking the participants for their time and an overview of next steps.

Quantitative Research Methods

Quantitative methods are typically used to collect data from many participants through the use of tests, surveys, standardized observation records and formal records and are intended to collect and analyze data in a precise manner be attaching quantifiable or numerical values to people's experience (Shields & Twycross, 2003). The intent of the survey was to 1.) learn about the larger US QAA community; 2.) make comparisons among organizations; 3.) validate data previously collected; and 4.) enable some level of generalization about the US QAA community. The survey was fielded after the interviews were completed, so that the questions could be based on the rich data collected from the interviews.

Implementation of Quantitative Research Methods

Preparation. The survey included both qualitative and quantitative questions based on the research questions and information, concepts, ideas, and themes highlighted as a result of the literature review; a review of organizational websites and documents; interviews; and my existing knowledge of the subject. A 12 to 14-question survey was developed using Google Forms including: closed-ended, Likert scale, and one to four open-ended questions (prompting

qualitative responses) (**Appendix 3: Survey Tool**). The open-ended consisted of extension, expansion, and general questions.

Face Validation. The survey tool was validated by three HE colleagues, unaffiliated with the study, and my primary supervisor. I sent emails to each person asking for specific feedback regarding various aspects of the survey from its clarity to appropriateness given the research questions. Upon receipt of the feedback, I incorporated revisions as needed. (**Appendix 4: Instructions for Validation Assistance**)

Implementation. As noted previously, the study took place in 2020 while civil unrest was going on in the US and globally. As such, the survey was fielded at a time that I thought agency representatives would be more likely to respond given the public attention to social justice issues. Approximately 300 surveys were successfully emailed and 48 responses were received. The survey window was two and half weeks between July 20 and August 7, 2020. Surveys were emailed in mid-July 2020 then follow-up reminders were sent approximately one to two days before the survey deadline, requesting that individuals complete the survey if they had not already done so.

Data Analysis

Semi-Structured Interviews

The interviews were analyzed taking into account the research questions, theoretical framework, and by using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach. The approach to analysis was both an inductive and deductive approach when analyzing the data to determine themes. An inductive approach involves allowing themes to emerge from the data organically while deductive analysis involves approaching the data with predetermined themes based on theory or prior knowledge (Armat et al, 2018). For purposes of this analysis, these approaches were used together. Specifically, the Braun and Clarke (2006) approach includes six steps which I completed in the following order: familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes then the final write up.

Data analysis began with me familiarizing myself with the data through the transcription of the interviews. Three out of the twelve interviews were transcribed manually, and the remaining interviews were transcribed using an online paid transcription software, Ebby.com, which I used for the initial transcriptions. Audio files were uploaded to Ebby.com and auto

transcribed within 15 minutes. Then, I followed up by carefully reading and cleaning up the transcriptions. In finalizing the transcriptions, I made notes and memos throughout the process, indicating key points and identifying sections that could serve as potential quotes. I flagged any passages related to Fraser's (2009) theoretical framework regarding representation, recognition, and redistribution.

Upon the finalization of the transcriptions, I conducted a more in-depth review of the transcripts followed by coding of the interview data. I created a chart which included high level categories related to the interview questions or general subject area of the questions. Next, in order to code the data, I read through each transcript and highlighted various phrases or concepts and added them to my coding table under the general area associated with the subject matter. Phrases represented an idea or feeling related to that category, and some phrases were coded with new codes and subsequently added to the table. In reviewing codes, I collated them all together into more categories identified by the codes which allowed me to gain a more condensed picture of the key points and commonalities that appeared throughout the data. The next step included generating themes based on the codes followed by a deeper review and refinement of themes. The named themes were then considered in relationship to how they aligned with elements of my research questions and Fraser's (2009) framework. Themes were then reviewed with data collected via survey and focus group results to compare results and findings specifically looking for corroboration or divergence.

Focus Group

Wilkinson (1998) argued that focus group analysis is not as well explained as other methods and that little attention is given to analysis for this method. Overall, researchers have commonly used two methods or treating focus group data analysis similar to one-on-one interviews: systematic coding and content analysis. For this study, focus group interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a similar method as the interview data. The data was coded and themes were generated and then reviewed with information gathered in the interviews, and survey.

Survey

The quantitative data collected was analyzed using statistical analysis to summarize the characteristics about the population and the qualitative data using content analysis. Survey data was exported to an excel spreadsheet from Google Forms, and initial analysis of the data included creating pivot tables to determine basic information about the sample including: organizational type, type of respondent (volunteer or staff) recognition status. Using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software, I cross tabulated the data responses given to the following questions or independent variables against other questions included in the survey:

- Quality Focus: Quality Assurance and/or Quality Enhancement

- Recognition Status: USDE and/or CHEA

- Organizational Type: Institutional, Programmatic/Specialized, or Membership Organization

The responses for each open-ended question were coded and then grouped into general themes. Upon analysis of the survey's quantitive and qualitative data, the findings were reviewed with the resulting data analysis for the interviews and focus groups.

Ethical Considerations

Potential ethical issues are a key consideration when conducting research. Researchers should make sure participants are safe and protected from any unnecessary stress at all times (Cacciattolo, 2015). Each stage of the research process presents an opportunity for ethical concerns to arise including the type of project chosen; the research context; research and data collection methods; participant characteristics; types of data collected; data analysis and what happens with the data (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2002). In using both qualitative and quantitative methods, there were a range of ethical considerations for this study including: informed consent; confidentiality; and research bias. Williams (2009) noted that aforementioned considerations are commonly associated with qualitative methods; however, Jones (2000) pointed out that some of the same ethical concerns should also be considered when using quantitative methods. Due to the ethical concerns, I used measures to ensure good ethical practice that were aligned with the University of Liverpool's Internal Review Board and ethical

protocols (**Appendix 5: University of Liverpool Ethics Approval**). The following section highlights specific concerns and how I mitigated those considerations throughout the study.

Permission

Gaining permission to carry out research is one of the first steps of implementation of the research design. This involves gaining access to the organization in which the research will be conducted. This stage allows the researcher an opportunity to present their credentials as a serious researcher and establish their ethical positions in relation to their proposed study (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2002). For this study, I did not conduct research within any particular organization, nor in my own organization; however, I sought and received permission from the organization of my employment acknowledging that I was conducting research; a membership organization that allowed me access to their email distribution list; and a South African QA organization.

Informed Consent

Informed consent is the process for communicating where subjects choose to participate in research after being informed of the facts that would likely have bearing on their decisions and serves as one of the bedrocks of ethical practice (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2002). Study subjects must be aware that their participation is voluntary; they are free to withdraw from the study at any time without any unfavorable consequences; and they are not subject to harm as a result of their participation or lack of participation in the study (Bhattacherjee, 2012).

The principle of informed consent was followed and obtained for all participants. Individuals were invited to participate in interviews, the survey, and focus groups, via email with general information regarding the study and a note that participation was voluntary. Upon acceptance of the invitations to participate, consent forms and study information sheets were distributed via email and collected for interview and focus group participants prior to sessions. Additionally, the consent information and a brief overview of the study were included in the survey preamble which required acknowledgement of consent in order to complete the survey. Prior to the start of interviews and the focus group sessions, I reviewed the consent form and reiterated the voluntary nature of the study; the confidentiality and privacy measures; and invited participants to ask any questions regarding the study and any other ethical concerns.

Privacy, Anonymity, and Confidentiality

Anonymity and confidentiality are two methods used to protect subjects' privacy, therefore protecting their interests and future well-being. Complete anonymity is not possible in all research designs such as those using interviews or focus groups; however, participants should be assured confidentiality (Bhattacherjee, 2012). The following section details the measures taken to protect research participants.

Qualitative Data Collection.

All participants involved in the interviews and the focus groups were individually emailed invitations to participate. Upon confirmation of participation, subjects were sent an informed consent form and a participant information form which included detailed information regarding the measures that would be taken during the study to ensure privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality. Interviews were conducted one-on-one and audio or video recorded. Focus group participants were aware of only the people included in their groups during their respective sessions. Both interview and focus group participants were briefed on anonymity and confidentiality methods used and purposes prior to the start of sessions. All participants were informed that individual quotes may be used but not without explicit permission. Moreover, all interview and focus group transcripts were anonymized by concealing the organizational names, participant names, and any personable identifiable information.

Quantitative Data Collection.

Survey participants submitted their responses anonymously; apart from participants who indicated they would be willing to participate in focus groups. These respondents provided their email addresses. As such, I could identify their responses to survey questions. Once email addresses were collected, email addresses were removed from the data which was exported for analysis. Data collected during interviews, the survey, and focus groups was collected and stored on a secure password protected home network. All interview and focus group transcripts and audio files were saved under anonymous naming conventions.

Researcher Bias

Bias is embedded throughout the research process. Williams (2009) argued that researchers should always remain aware of the potential ethical concerns, maintain clarity

throughout the process, take time and carefully analyze the data by staying informed regarding ways in which the bias or other concerns could come into play with the research process. Some experimental and quantitative researchers argued that flexible and pragmatic designs are not as scientific as other designs and more likely to contain bias when research designs are changed during the execution of the research (Durrhiem, 2006). In particular, my positionality and role within my professional community is a concern for bias. One's positionality can affect every phase of the research process. For example, when researching it is sometimes difficult to navigate and balance the insider and outsider roles during the research process. In this case, the researcher may be acquainted with some of the possible participants included in the sample (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). In order to mitigate the potential bias and other concerns as a result of my positionality, I made research participants aware of my professional background within the QAA community and provided them with information regarding the study including goals, objectives, and timelines. The ethical influence of my professional role was limited, since I ensured that all participants selected did not or had not worked with me directly in my professional capacity. As such, acknowledging the role of positionality in qualitative research is a key factor in the process that helps ensure credibility in the research process (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). Additionally, in the context of this study, I acknowledged my positionality in chapter 1 by describing "who I am" and its impact of the research process.

Additionally, Guba and Lincoln (2005) suggested maintaining a journal of field notes or a reflective journal, detailing the process, and Smith (2016) suggested that researchers also consult with others to gain external perspective to help with objectivity and reduce bias in the process. The use of a researcher log was important for me to include in the process as highlighted in Figure 3.1. As such, I kept a researcher log with field notes and journaled primarily for reflection during the development and data collection process. However, the log assisted with implementation of the research design and served as a way for me to document the process, my thoughts, and allowed me to reflect. Specifically, it helped me to actively engage more with the different research steps specifically how to select and carry out the methods (interviews, survey, and focus groups) and helped me in some cases clarify my understanding of more about the interplay of social justice and QAA agencies. I tracked some moments when there were connections or disconnects between ideas or steps during the process as well as areas for

potential bias. Additionally, it served as a great reference point for discussion and engagement when interacting with my faculty supervisor throughout and for the write-up this thesis.

In addition to the researcher log to help mitigate bias on my part, I consulted with my academic supervisors and a colleague who I designated as my accountability partner. I conducted frank conversations with these individuals regarding my assumptions, potential biases, and rationale for my decision making throughout the process.

Summary

This chapter highlighted and provided details for the rationale, development, and implementation of the critical steps in the research process. This information included discussions of the research design, research approach, the methods used for data collection and analysis and ethical considerations of the study. The next chapter will present the findings from the data collection related to the relationship between social justice and QAA agencies. Chapter 4 begins with a discussion of the qualitative findings followed by the quantitative results.

Chapter 4: Findings and Results

Chapter Overview

This chapter presents key findings and results of the data collected during the research process. The first part of and majority of the chapter introduces the qualitative findings of the study which served as the primary method resulting from the semi-structured interviews; responses to the open-ended survey questions; and focus groups. This qualitative data is followed by the quantitative results of the data analysis of the survey. This section provides general information about the characteristics of the US QAA community surveyed; some brief context for the findings; and information specifically related to the research questions posed. Following the presentation of the results, the chapter concludes with a brief summary and a preview of chapter 5.

Qualitative Findings: Interviews, Survey, and Focus Groups

The qualitative data collection included the following methods in the order in which they were conducted: semi-structured interviews, open-ended survey questions, and focused groups. Through these methods I learned more about the participants' views, by allowing participants to comment in more detail about their understandings of social justice; its relationship to QAA; and agency practices as these related to the research questions. Interviews were conducted with participants from the US and South Africa (SA) QAA communities. A total of 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted as the first primary data collection method. Eight US interviews took place from December 2019 through March 2020; and four SA interviews were conducted in from May 2020 to June 2020. Two focus groups were conducted in September 2020.

As previously noted, the survey, which was distributed to US participants, asked participants to respond to one to four open-ended questions. The open-ended questions were used to gain slightly more detailed information from participants primarily on their understanding of social justice and social justice priorities (**Appendix 3: Survey Tool**). The focus groups acted to supplement the interviews and allowed participants to react to preliminary findings resulting from the interviews and survey; to solicit any ideas and/or perspectives from the participants that were not highlighted in the previous methods; and to provide feedback on the newly developed "how-to" guidelines I developed to aid agencies. All qualitative data was analyzed using Braun

and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach. The following sections highlight the findings that emerged from the analysis of the qualitative data collected.

US Interviews, Survey, and Focus Groups Data Analysis

The themes highlighted from the data collected from all participants include: 1.) race and equity as key components for discussing social justice; 2.) the role social justice plays in making quality assessments- leveling the playing field; and 3.) the importance of the use of accreditation standards. The themes were grouped together basically answering the questions- What? Why? and How? Interview and focus group comments are identified with quotation marks followed by "P" and a number as such: Participant 1 = (P1) indicating the respective participant that the comment can be attributed. Likewise, comments from the survey are identified as Survey Participant or "SP."

What are We Talking About: Race and Equity as key components for Understanding Social Justice.

Throughout the qualitative data collection process, the concept of social justice was specifically asked about and often used; however, the idea conjures up various meanings and thoughts for individuals and organizations. As expected, based on the literature review, participants also had various understandings of what is meant by the concept based on their personal values and contexts. Analysis of responses showed that there is a general lack of consistency and clarity when it comes to what is meant by social justice. Generally, social justice is not seen as an objective concept as indicated by participants. "It is a loaded term and has multiple definitions that differ based upon who you're talking to… and so that's where accreditors are really kind of stymied by this idea of what exactly we are talking about(P3)?" The description of social justice as a loaded term could be considered an example of rhetoric or value-laden word intended to influence opinions. Loaded words reflect bias and have emotional implications that could bring about both negative and positive reactions (Murray, 2018), depending on who you ask. Additionally, based on Participant 3's comments, the term is subjective and this subjectivity poses a challenge especially for accreditors when attempting to have dialog around social justice. Moreover, several respondents noted the political nature of the concept which aligns with the loaded description. For example, one participant commented that "If you just say social justice, I think most people would hear it as having a political angle to it

that does not feel like it fits with accreditation which is politically neutral, but student success and accomplishment are intentional" (P8). As noted earlier, the concept is not neutral and has both positive and negative implications including political implications; however, this may not align with the accreditation process, since accreditation is seen as a neutral process. Accreditation is seen by many as not related to politics but an academic process concerned with student success. As such, many might not understand how social justice has a role or fits within the accreditation process.

As noted, the concept of social justice is subjective because it is based on the audience and based on the environment you are in, which provides for the concept to not only have different meanings but also different ways for people to approach the idea which is illustrated by Participant 8's commentary on social justice and accreditation. Moreover, other participants also commented on subjectivity. Participant 3 noted that "social justice has multiple definitions based upon who you are talking to…" (P3) and "it's different depending on where you're looking at things in different aspects or different parts of the world have different approaches to this [social justice]" (P4). Further, Participant 9 commented, saying that "[T]the global concern about social justice is in a sense contextually bound and influenced, and there are historical, political power relations mostly, class distinction and [there] is a very strong racial dimension, because you find disadvantage, especially if it's race-related and class related" (P9). Social justice is a concept that is of global interest and is influenced by numerous factors and cannot be separated from historical, political, and socioeconomic factors. Furthermore, issues of race and class underly the concept when discussing disadvantages.

As such, it is not surprising that discussions around social justice in the US were intricately intertwined with issues concerned with race and equity. For example, Participant 5 articulated that "There is no more powerful social justice issue in America than race. It defines our lives in way that may be present in other countries, but not like it has here [in America] … We have so much inequality in this society, and it's driven by race and secondarily by economic inequality" (P5). P5 suggested that issues around race in America are the most important social justice issues compared to other countries due to the prominent role it plays in society. As such, discussions about social justice as noted by respondents cannot be separated from context which is shaped by history, politics, race, and class.

Further exploration of responses showed that when discussing social justice that terminologies were often used interchangeably—access, diversity, equity, equality, and inclusion when discussing or describing social justice. "I don't think this is the term used… diversity, access, cultural competency…those terms [used and] are more tenuously related to social justice" (P1). Accreditors may not necessarily be using the term social justice, but they are using other terms that are slightly related to social justice. Moreover, the way in which respondents discussed social justice seemed to be related; however, the concepts discussed were not exactly always defined, articulated, or named social justice. "[Accreditors] they, use it yet, they don't name it social justice" (P8). Elements or components associated with social justice are used and addressed by accreditors, but they are not necessarily describing the term or concept as social justice; however, the discussions with participants about social justice often came back to a need to address inequalities or at the core harkened back to issues related to race and equity even if people were not specifically identifying issues as social justice.

Specifically, equity was noted as a key element of social justice discussions. It was discussed in relation to either defining social justice singularly, a component of the social justice, or directly related; and it was found to have a strong relationship to social justice in higher education QAA. One participant noted "When we talk about social justice, what we are talking about for me—it means equity" (P2). For some, social justice and equity were not necessarily the same, but very closely related. One participant questioned or noted "if that it [equity] is somewhat of a synonym for social justice, maybe it is, maybe it is not…" (P1). In the case of social justice and equity, the participant indicated a close relationship between the concepts. Additionally, there were distinctions made between equity and social justice while acknowledging the connection between the concepts. For example, Participant 5 noted that "accreditation has to be directly involved in achieving equity, and I'm separating from social justice, but they are related" (P5). Accreditation has a role to play in achieving equity which is related to but not the same as accreditation. Although some participants acknowledged the closeness of the terms, data also highlighted the need for there to be a distinction albeit subtle between the concepts with acknowledgement of the interconnectedness of the terms. Furthermore, analysis of the open-ended survey questions illustrated the prominence of equity within the social justice context. Twenty-three percent of respondents indicated "yes" that their agencies had a common reference for social justice. For those who answered yes, almost half

indicated that equity was included in how their agencies understood social justice. For example, one survey participant commented that "W[w]e define our work in terms of equity and within a framework that defines particular outcomes related to student success" (SP). For this participant, their accreditation work is based on the concept of equity which guides student success outcomes. The responses indicated that equity was a component of how they directly understood social justice within the accreditation and their organizational contexts.

In sum, the understanding of social justice varies depending on context; and, social justice within the context of the US is influenced by the country's historical, political, and socioeconomic factors which is highlighted in the prevalence of race and equity when understanding social justice. The concept was often used as an umbrella term in the context of addressing issues related to race and equity. Although there were multiple understandings of the social justice, the results were important to examine because these understandings had implications for how agencies incorporate and set social justice priorities. As such, after getting participants' thoughts about social justice, it led to identifying how accreditors saw the relationship between social justice and QAA. The following section highlights the analysis of data related to views on the role of social justice and accreditation.

Why is this important: The Role of Social Justice in Quality Assurance and Accreditation.

As noted earlier, throughout the data collection process, the concept of social justice was discussed separately in the context of HE and discussed by participants in relation to the role it plays in making quality assessments. Accreditation agencies saw their role in incorporating or paying attention to social justice issues on a continuum from no role to a specific role. There was variation in the role agencies should and can play as well as their awareness and attention to social justice issues which depended on number of factors including, but not limited to, how they saw their responsibilities related to ensuring academic quality and the context in which agencies operated.

No to Limited Role. As noted earlier, the concept of social justice is understood by many as subjective which has both positive and negative implications including political implications. In particular, analysis showed for some that political implications did not seem to align with the accreditation process, since accreditation was seen by some as a more neutral and academic process. For example, Participant 8 commented that "If you just say social justice, I think most

people would hear it as having a political angle to it that does not feel like it fits with accreditation which is politically neutral, but student success and accomplishment are intentional" (P8). For example, Participant 1 commented generally about accreditors saying that "Some accreditors… will say that [social justice] has nothing to do with quality in education … our job [as accreditors] is completely about [determining] what is a good education" (P1). Some accreditors see their roles as very narrowly defined in which their purpose is to determine if a quality academic experience is provided which does not include addressing social justice issues. As a result, elements that are not pre-determined or directly related to the education or academic offering are outside of the scope and are not seen to have a connection to quality. Another participant went a step further by noting that "…[T]there is a good deal of distance, and it's for a good reason. We [accreditors] were invented to look at academic quality in terms of intellectual development more than any other single factor…And over the years, we've come to realize as a society that intellectual development is about more… how we live and work in society… it is about our obligations to each other" (P5). Participant 5's comment provided more context to Participant 1's comment and a possible rationale for why the relationship between accreditation and social justice may not be an automatic fit. As noted by Participant 1, accreditation was initially seen as an academic exercise conducted within the confines of the university; however, as times have changed and there is more integration between society and work, the responsibilities of accreditation are also shifting to be more attuned to issues that are outside of the original purpose of academic review.

Leveling the Playing Field. Although some did not see the role of social justice within the accreditation process, others were very clear about how social justice was vital to the work of accreditors. In particular, leveling the playing field or providing opportunities to address inequality or promote equity for marginalized or disadvantaged groups was a common theme. Analysis of the responses revealed that some believe that accrediting agencies can be directly involved in creating situations or opportunities that make conditions more balanced or fair to those who might be at a disadvantage. For example, Participant 2 noted that "Agencies can play a role in how they develop their criteria to ensure equity across all underrepresented groups and socioeconomic levels" (P2). As noted by this participant, it was suggested that agencies can impact equity outcomes for specific underrepresented groups directly through the use of their accreditation standards or expectations. In addition, another participant highlighted that "we

[agencies] have a responsibility to support groups to support different quality of life to help education level the playing field a little bit" (P7). Participant 7's comments go beyond what agencies can do by also suggesting what agencies should be doing as one of its responsibilities.

In regard to responsibilities, some respondents noted various priorities in discussing what or how agencies should focus their attention that reinforce the leveling the playing field role. For example, respondents highlighted various forms of equity including social, racial, and health and attention to global sustainable development goals as focus areas for their agencies. As noted by Participant 5 earlier, "there is no more powerful social justice issue in America than race" (P5). In terms of social justice issues, P5 argued that historically issues of race have been at the center of social justice efforts and is one of the most powerful issues for the US. As such, this was reflected in conversations about agency priorities and their contributions to leveling the playing field. Additionally, some agencies saw their contribution to leveling the playing field not only situated within the US but also at a global level which in turn is hoped to have impacts on local systems. This was evidenced through discussions about the United Nations' (UN) Sustainable Development Goals as guidance when one agency set its social justice priorities. The UN Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs) are a global call to action for all countries to address some of the most pressing social and economic issues on a global level that would lead to more equitable societies. For example, Participant 7 commented that" [our agency] has adopted the UNSDGs … we are obsessed with UNSDG 16" (P7). In particular, UNSDG 16, as referenced by P7, deals with the promotion of "peaceful and inclusive societies" and "accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels" (United Nations n.d.). Overall, most participants expressed clarity that there is a role for QAA to address social issues specifically impacting marginalized groups to help make conditions more equal for people to have better qualities of life on both local and global levels.

Factors influencing how agencies saw their roles. Overall, most participants expressed clarity that there is a role for their agencies, accreditation, and HE to address social issues specifically impacting marginalized groups in order to help make conditions more equal for people to have better qualities of life on both local and global levels. As such, leveling the playing field was a prominent role for how agencies saw their relationship with social justice issues. While it is important to highlight the relationship between social justice and the overall work of QAA agencies, it is important to note that the role that social justice plays in QAA is

also influenced by a number of other factors as related to their understanding of social justice (as
noted earlier) and context. In particular, context influences not only how agencies prioritize
issues, but also how an agency might determine how SJ plays a role within the agency and its
assessments of quality. Factors may include the type of accrediting organization (institutional or
programmatic); missions of the institutions or programs served; professions served by the
accreditors; student populations served by intuitions/programs; politics; and/or the organizational
composition of the agency. Specifically, the mission and objectives of agencies' member
institutions and programs may influence the agency as highlighted by Participant 8 in the
following comment: "we have some systems of schools that are very intentional… who we
accredit [and] our leader in reducing equity gaps and that helps infuse itself back into the
accreditor. If you've got a large number of significant institutions that have a shared direction.
You can work with them on those issues" (P8). Agencies may take their cues for how or what
issues to address by working with institutions in order to collaboratively address social justice
issues rather than a more top-down approach with the accreditor usually being the entity on top.
Institutions or programs impact how accreditors act, and this also illustrates that accreditors are
responsive to institutions. This point was highlighted in a survey response to an open-ended
question regarding how agencies understood social justice. The participant noted that "W [w]e
base social justice definitions as they relate to each institution and program's mission and
goals" (SP). This agency based its understanding of social justice on the characteristics of the
units that it accredits which impacts how an agency views the role of social justice in carrying
out its work.

Furthermore, analysis showed at the programmatic/specialized level that the profession or
specialization area in which an agency accredits plays an influential role in the agency's priority
setting. For example, Participant 1 commented …" the accreditor does need to respond to the
profession except not be duly influenced by it" (P1). In the case of programmatic/specialized
agencies, there is a close relationship to the profession, and so, the accreditor must strike a
balance between having an awareness of issues and not being overly influenced by the
profession. Therefore, avoiding the potential of undermining the agency's oversight role as a
neutral external arbitrator of quality. Moreover, Participant 6 also noted the importance of the
professions as evidenced through the following comment: "[In] social work… our profession is
actualized for a quest for social and economic justice… the organization mirrors the values of the

profession" (P6). For this profession, striving for social justice is at its foundation and these values are reflected by the accrediting agency.

In addition to external factors for how it views its role with respect to social justice, agencies' organizational composition matter (e.g., organizational values, leadership, volunteers, and staff composition). Agencies' organizational values are important and influence agency's efforts. For example, Participant 5 commented that "I think that the agencies that have social justice as part of their ethos or their core values in terms of specialized and professional accreditation tend to be addressing it [social justice] in some way (P4). For example, it is in our mission statement and strategic plan has social justice and activities are aligned with this…The organization mirrors the values of the profession…" (P6). Some agencies are more inclined to pay attention to social justice issues or incorporate elements into their operations based on their mission and/or the values of the institutions or professions they serve.

Furthermore, the organizational leadership and volunteer membership in combination with the staff composition influence the advancement of issues. For example, Participant 6 indicated that "You have to have people committed to those ideas. Given our history of focusing on marginalized groups… you have to be willing as an organization to acknowledge that there are injustices and make changes… you have to have a leader at the top that is committed then you have to bring in people that reflect that attitude and understanding that as a profession we are committed these [social justice] issues" (P6).

How are agencies making this happen? The Incorporation of Social Justice into Accreditation Practices.

As noted previously, one of the primary research questions examined was how agencies are incorporating social justices into their practices. Participants were asked about how and the types of activities that were reflected in their work. Analysis showed that accreditation standards, policies, and procedures (SPPs), also known as accreditation criteria, were one of the most prevalent ways agencies operationalized and facilitated attention to social justice issues. Standards or criteria may include policies and procedures used in the evaluation of institutions and programs. The following sections delve deeper into what influences attention to social justice through accreditation standards including the influence of quality assurance or quality enhancement perspectives and student success (as presented as a specific focus area which aligns with the aforementioned themes -- understanding social justice and leveling the playing field).

Lastly, under this theme, I highlight the challenges for incorporating social justice into practice with regard to SPPS, since most discussions with participants included a dialog about the challenges or realities faced with tackling certain topics.

Quality Assurance and Quality Enhancement (Improvement). In the context of QA and QE, this study sought to explore if an agency's focus on QA and/or QE influenced if and how social justice was incorporated into agencies' SPPs. Participants were asked directly about QA and QE and whether a particular focus influenced how attention to social justice was operationalized within agencies. Throughout discussions, the term QE was used interchangeably with quality improvement or continuous improvement. Analysis of the data highlighted, that QE activities provided more flexibility than QA to incorporate social justice elements into expectations particularly around SPPs. For example, Participant 5 commented that "Quality improvement provides little more of an open opportunity until the standards change. It doesn't matter what happens on the quality assurance side… The hardest thing to do is change standards. (P5)." Quality enhancement or improvement allows for more flexibility with the standards, since changes are sometimes difficult for accreditors to make. As such, standards may be slow to change. Additionally, as noted previously QA deals more with compliance, so there is not much leeway given until the standards change. Furthermore, in terms of the actual changes to standards, the analysis showed that a focus on quality enhancement may also provide more latitude in creating standards that push some of the traditional boundaries. For example, Participant 4 commented that "when you're in quality enhancement (focus) you can kind of do what you want… You can really go out there with your standards. If you want to push in a certain direction on any type of issue whether it be curricular or ethical or whatever you want to do" (P4). In other words, when an accrediting agency focuses on quality enhancement, the agency tends to have more freedom to explore new areas with the standards and perhaps go beyond the traditional boundaries especially in certain areas like curriculum or ethics.

It is important to note that a vital part of implementation of the SPPs is the interaction between the accreditors and the institutions and/or programs they accredit. As such, it was highlighted that the implementation of SPPs through the interaction or dialog with institutions and programs is influenced differently by quality assurance or enhancement expectations. For example, one participant highlighted that, "you need to have standards and you need to have formal expectations… but the most important thing is the quality of the conversations that we

have with institutions (P8)." More specifically, "… quality improvement is a more fluid or porous concept and because the quality improvement interaction with the [site visit] team [about standards and expectations] …. [I]it allows for raising a number of issues that you might not raise over here on the harder edge/accountability side- that is what quality assurance is…" (P5). In other words, interacting with institutions around the standards is an important part of the accreditation process. The ongoing dialog that happens with the accreditor and institutions provides an opportunity for more meaningful conversations to take place beyond simple compliance to include more subjective matters (e.g., social justice outcomes). This type of dialog becomes easier to engage in when agencies are engaged in QE conversations relative to more compliance based or QA focused on accountability. Furthermore, another participant noted, that efforts for agencies to pay more attention to social justice in their work "isn't asking people to make up new ways of approaching QA, but it is making sure that equity or social justice questions are part of how they do that analysis and … not having a mechanical or check off approach but more of an inquiry and contemporary way to describe it in a mission driven approach to the institution" (P8). In other words, agencies do not have to completely abandon some of the more traditional activities associated with carrying out their QA responsibilities which may be associated with a more audit or compliance culture; however, there is room for equity and social justice elements to be infused into expectations by taking a more inquiry-based approach with institutions about how they are meeting the standards around social justice elements as it aligns with institutional missions.

  Student Success. Accreditors typically evaluate or assess quality in a number key areas for the institutions and/or programs that they accredit including: mission; financial and academic resources; business and academic planning; student learning and assessment; and student achievement or outcomes. Student success is often noted by institutions and accreditors as key area for evaluation of quality. Specifically, student success in the context of HE is a vital component when discussing social justice and quality. Though analysis of the data did not highlight a definition for student success, the concept was acknowledged in many ways as participants discussed a focus on how students are prepared and managed throughout the educational process in order to accomplish individual goals. For example, when asked about social justice and how it plays out in accreditation, Participant 8 noted the challenges with the semantics of social justice, but also acknowledged the focus of accreditation in the context of

social justice and the importance of student success. Participant 8 commented that "If you just say social justice, I think most people would hear it as having a political angle to it that does not feel like it fits with accreditation which is politically neutral, but student success and accomplishment are intentional" (P8). In other words, social justice may not necessarily align with ideas about accreditation; however, student success is an idea that is more familiar and less controversial within HE and is an intentional part of accreditation. Furthermore, as it relates to understanding social justice within the context of accreditation, analysis of survey participant open-ended responses also highlighted the importance of student success. For example, a survey respondent noted that "our work [happens]…within a framework that defines particular outcomes related to student success" (SP). Within the context of social justice and accreditation, this takes place by indicating specific student success outcomes or expectations for accredited programs or institutions as part of the key areas that are evaluated by the accreditor. Moreover, the data showed that student success is needed in conjunction with equity efforts. This point was illustrated in the following comment: "instead of having a definition or standard that says you must be focused on equity issues. We've really just said you need to be focused on all students and every student's success" (P3). In other words, if addressing equity issues is the focus, then there may need to be targeted focus on the success of all students which may in turn help address equity issues. Overall, student success was highlighted throughout the data as an intentional area of focus for accreditors in their accreditation SPPs and expectations and illustrated how some agencies see the role of SJ in accreditation being realized in the context of student success. Although accreditors seem to be clear about the role social justice can play within QAA particularly through SPPS, putting social justice into practice through expectations poses numerous challenges. In highlighting the results, the next section outlines some of the challenges that face accreditors which surfaced as an important sub-theme of the data analysis.

Challenges to Incorporating Social Justice QAA.

In analyzing how agencies are paying attention to social justice, a number of challenges for agencies were highlighted in the data. As noted previously accreditation SPPS are one of the most obvious ways in which agencies incorporate social justice into their oversight. As such, this section will focus primarily on the challenges with regard to the development, implementation, and evaluation of SPPs and expectations.

Legal Challenges. Responses revealed there is some reluctance or apprehension by accreditors to be more socially conscious with their expectations due to legal concerns, the USDE recognition framework, and how to actually incorporate or implement standards. For example, one participant noted that "I think accreditors [should] develop standards along this continuum… social justice… [however] I think they are going to run into legal concerns, institutional pushback based on tradition, and political challenges (P5). Specifically, agencies are aware of the legal environment and the potential challenge it poses. Another shared the following concern: "My concern is once we start moving into the accountability side of it [social justice] … we open ourselves up to a fair amount of criticism and frankly legal action" (P3). Furthermore, …" accreditation is a good target for people that want to make a point in a lawsuit" (P4).

USDE Regulatory Challenges. Next, the development and implementation of standards is particularly challenging given the regulatory framework that US accreditors operate under, especially those agencies recognized by the USDE. There is a hesitancy to go outside of the expectations of the USDE in fear that an agency will not meet the USDE's standards. For example, Participant 2 commented "How far could you reach as an agency with standards? You know… I don't see anybody really wanting to push too hard. Everyone kind of likes to stay in their lane and rightfully so at some level because those that have experimented have kind of had their hands slapped by … the department [US Department of Education] …" (P2). The participant asked about the limitations of agency accreditation standards due to the not wanting to go too far beyond the USDE's expectations. Agencies are hesitant to experiment or implement activities that are less concrete like social justice because they do not want to be sanctioned or penalized by the USDE.

Participants acknowledged that more attention to social justice would require changes in educational programs and the way accreditors operate within the recognition framework. For example, Participant 16 commented that "This type of change in educational programs certainly takes more latitude than the USDE provides for us in monitoring programs for compliance" (P16). In other words, to make some of the changes to incorporate SJ agencies would need more flexibility than currently provided by the USDE, since the USDE expectations are geared more toward monitoring compliance. It is important to note that the political environment is a major consideration for agencies due to the interplay between the USDE and the public. The political nature of accreditation is highlighted by Participant 4, who noted that "if you try to do something

as an agency, you get kind of shut down politically for doing the thing...the agencies are supposed to be independent, but they're recognized by NACIQI and they need access to the federal funding" (P4). In other words, despite their independence from the federal government, agencies remain accountable to the USDE as gatekeepers via the input of the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI) which makes recommendations to USDE regarding agency recognition.

       Internal Organizational Capacity Challenges. Lastly, accreditors are challenged with the development, implementation, and evaluation of standards. This is highlighted by Participant 16 in the following comment: "We're looking at this area and we are really struggling to find information… on this regarding the ability to write criteria so that it's in a meaningful, measurable way that programs can evidence" (P16). This agency finds difficulty in developing standards with social justice attention because of the lack of information available to guide them on how to develop relevant and quantifiable expectations that programs can meet and document. Participant 20 commented that "one of the challenges for my own context… is in the structure and interpretation of the standards themselves; there are conflicting assumptions" (P20). In other words, the way in which standards are structured and interpreted pose real challenges for agencies since the interpretation of new types of standards may involve some trial and error. Agencies are challenged, because they are being asked to developed new standards but may not have clear and consistent information or data to serve as the basis for revisions to standards or guidance to those making the interpretations/assessments/evaluations of standards. Additionally, responses reflected the challenge of "How are we going to apply this type of new criterion to a program? Specifically, the board struggles with probably the most those really gray areas, [about] how well is an institution addressing issues" (P3). In other words, board members often serve as the decision makers for whether institutions/programs are meeting expectations and they tend to struggle with their assessments when there are areas that are not well defined in the standards or standards are more subjective. Participant 8 comments seemed to summarize the overall state of accreditors. P8 noted that "accreditors… share the underlying commitment to the purpose but are probably in very different places … from each other about comfort and talking about it [social justice]; and willingness to try things and maybe get things wrong" (P8). The data suggested that most accreditors agreed with paying more attention to social issues; however, they all may be at various stages of having conversations or taking action within their agencies

and comfort levels with taking a risk on developing new approaches to carrying out the work of
accreditation.

In sum, US accreditors are incorporating social justice elements into their practices to
varying degrees based on their own underlying assumptions and various influences. Because
many participants see social justice as closely related to addressing issues of equity, accreditors
do see a role for social justice in QAA, particularly in contributing to leveling the playing field.
The data indicated that one of the most common ways accreditors incorporate social justice
expectations is through the use of accreditation standards which is a cornerstone of the
accreditation process. The development, implementation, and interpretation/evaluation of SPPs
does not come without challenges that impact SPPs as well as the entire accreditation process.
Agencies are met with challenges from the legal and regulatory (USDE) fronts as well as internal
organizational challenges which cause apprehensiveness for some to move away from more
measurable SPPs or traditional expectations.

What More Can be Done

In examining how accrediting agencies are incorporating social justice into their practices,
the study also sought to understand what more could be done by agencies to either begin or build
upon efforts. As such, participants were asked specifically in the open-ended survey questions
about how they could do more. Due to the timing of the survey study, it presented a just in-time
opportunity to investigate how agencies incorporate social justice or address a specific issue -
institutional racism. Respondents were asked specifically if their agencies received calls or
requests from the public to address issues of institutional racism. This allowed me to investigate
what more respondents felt like could be done to incorporate social justice into their activities. In
addition to specific questions about institutional racism, respondents were asked about how they
might incorporate social justice aspects into their quality assessments. The following themes
emerged from the responses as how to address or further incorporate social justice elements into
accreditation activities:

- **Development of an understanding or reference point for social justice.** As noted
  earlier, the most agencies do not have a common reference point for social justice. As
  such, developing a common reference point to understand, discuss, assess, and evaluate
  social justice as it relates to standards, policies, procedures and/or operations and
  activities was highlighted. One respondent noted the following: "We believe that it

starts with developing a common understanding around what social justice is and then finding our (an institutional accreditor's) place in supporting its achievement. Our concern is always for that of the student, but our sphere of influence is with the institutions that comprise our membership. Identifying ways in which we can better support them in their efforts to improve equity in access and achievement for their student is the most effective way for us to have an impact on student outcomes and experiences".

- **Standards, Policies, and Procedures (SPP).** This relates to the standards, policies, and procedures which serve as the framework for how an agency operates and articulates the expectations for accredited institutions and programs. Several respondents referenced the importance of accreditation SPPs. For example, someone noted "… the best way to do this is through standards development…" and another expanded on this idea by noting that "[I]in order to have any impact, any changes must be incorporated in accreditation criteria and organizational policy and supported by administration and decision makers." Specifically, one respondent noted what standards should include by saying "I think the best way to do this is through standards development that overtly address diversity equity and inclusion" when responding to about how to incorporate social justice into their practices.

- **Use of Data**. This relates to how agencies routinely require institutions/programs to collect specific types of data and report data (e.g., retention, completion, demographics, etc). Several respondents mentioned the use of data as a way to identify, understand, and/or address social justice issues. For example, one respondent noted that agencies should "require institutions to evaluate their own disaggregated data and address any disparities in attainment by students from different groups" and another respondent advocated to "[I]increase reporting of data that would reflect issues related to social justice; requiring organizations to describe how they address these issues."

The South African Interview Data Analysis

Individuals were asked several questions regarding social justice priorities set by the SA government and how they were doing their work as well as lessons learned from the intentional focus on SJ within its national HE agenda and QAA. Analysis of the data revealed that an

aligned sense of purpose related to social justice and HE was influenced by a national agenda with set social justice priorities which in turn guided agencies on social justice issues. A number of concepts were highlighted for how social justice has been incorporated in the country's QAA framework. One of the most prominent themes to come out of the data was the articulation of common social justice issues as well as a common understanding for what social justice meant in the context of HE and the priority for SA. It was noted that social justice initiatives in SA related back to the initiatives outlined by the national government as part of the country's post-apartheid HE agenda. Furthermore, there was a common theme related to social justice in the form of providing opportunities and activities that were focused on addressing the discriminatory and inequities resulting from the SA apartheid system, which was highlighted as the context with racial equity and redress being primary objectives of social justice efforts. When specifically asked about priority issues and how they were identified…one respondent noted. "…we problematize it and we keep it in the consciousness. You must make it easy...for these things to be glossed over that's that for me is at the heart of the political project of social justice (P9)." In other words, SA and the HE community were explicit about the problems resulting from apartheid and thus identified issues to address and continue to bring attention in order to continue the quest for social justice in SA which was key to efforts.

Another theme that came from discussions with SA participants was similar to the US theme related to student success. In particular, there were acknowledgements by several participants that more attention was needed for student success and student support in social justice efforts within HE and the quality overseers. For example, redress was and continues to be a major social justice priority and access, likewise, was seen as needed to help the implementation of redress policies within HE. One participant noted that access and participation have been the focus but there is a need to move beyond this to student success. Participant 9 commented that "we [quality assurance community] have become more sophisticated in our thinking about them [social justice, equity, and access], and also added to them… There's no point to access without success… the problem is a revolving door syndrome. So, you have access but it's not accompanied by success, so more effort has been put into supporting students and enabling their success in institutions" (P9).   In other words, participants observations were that agencies and HE have focused primarily of providing redress (or racial equity) through access

but this is not enough to ensure that equity outcomes are met without more focus ways to retain and support students in their success so that they actually achieve larger societal justice goals.

Furthermore, in reference to access, student support, and student success, interestingly the use of language was highlighted in the research data. For example, Participant 9 commented on what reviewing an institution through the lens of student success looks like. Participant 9 commented that "we look at what is the institution doing to ensure success… how institutions are alienating spaces, especially for black African students. We're looking at what the other barriers are in terms of the language barrier because most African students and blacks in particular because they study through a medium of instruction which is a second or third language for them. Then we look at what are the supports structures for them" (P9). In terms of student success, QA examines what institutions are doing in order to provide the supports necessary for students to be successful. In the case of the SA universities and for Black and African students, language was noted as a major barrier to student success. As such, language was highlighted as an ongoing social justice issue that impacts equity and the goals of the transformation agenda. P12 noted that "language has always been a symbol of oppression in South Africa" (P12). The data suggested that there remain gaps in the social justice framework as it relates particularly to language. P12 noted that "there are still universities within SA that offer their programs in Afrikaans, and that is a kind of exclusion by its very nature… so we still have pockets… it is not something that is publicized… we have very good quality assurance, the policies, we've got a very good posture as far as that is concerned. But in terms of implementation, there is still a bit of a gap in the implementation of that policy" (P12). P12's comments indicated that there are still universities that use the Afrikaans language which is a language that was spoken historically by the minority ruling class in SA prior to apartheid and thus the language is not spoken by many thus acting as an exclusionary tool for universities. This was also echoed in comments by Participant 10 who noted that when asked about ongoing social justice issues around equity and redress that "I feel like the issue of language…It's something that even if when we talk social justice issues when [we] haven't even addressed it [language]" (P10). Language is an issue that is a social justice issue impacting the agenda; however, it is not something that has been addressed adequately which some in the QA community felt needed to be reexamined.

Summary of Qualitative Research

The data highlighted that the understanding of social justice varies but racial and equity issues are key components of the understanding and this in turn influences how many agencies see their role with regard to social justice and QAA. Specifically, some agencies do not see a role outside of the strict academic purview while others see their roles as helping to level the playing field or helping to mitigate injustices related to racial disparities and support equity efforts particularly in the US. Agencies are using accreditation standards as one of the most prominent ways to incorporate social justice; however, agencies are apprehensive and challenged with the development, implementation and interpretation/evaluation of standards given potential gray areas that may exist; due to legal risks to their agencies and/or not meeting USDE expectations.

The SA discussions also indicated a similar role of social justice within HE and QA as helping to level the playing field. These discussions highlighted social justice priorities focused on redressing social issues stemming from apartheid. SA's QA's attempt at leveling the playing field is focused on issues related to historical racial and economic disparities. Additionally, SA interviews highlighted the importance of having an aligned national agenda of redress and equity that helped provide guidance to agencies; however, issues remain with implementing meeting social justice priorities. These were highlighted as areas for improvement or refocus by participants including a more concentrated effort on student success to accompany participation and access efforts and the reexamination and focus on the importance of language with the SA QAA and higher education community's social justice goals.

Quantitative Findings: Survey Findings

As the second part of the data collection process, the survey was intended to provide an opportunity to learn more about the US QAA community by gathering information directly from accrediting agencies to make comparisons among organizations; validate data previously collected; and make generalizations about the larger US QAA community. The survey included both quantitative and qualitative questions developed using the information, concepts, ideas, and themes highlighted as a result of the literature review, research questions, information from interviews and my existing knowledge of the subject. The survey was sent out to over 300 people and had a response rate of 16%. The following section includes some of the most relevant findings from the survey which included data related to how accreditors saw their roles, what

agencies are currently doing or done; and what more can done to advance attention to social justice issues.

Respondent Profile

Survey respondents represented individuals (either accreditation agency staff or volunteers) from the US accreditation community. Respondents were primarily from programmatic/specialized accreditors recognized by USDE and/or CHEA followed by USDE and/ CHEA recognized institutional accreditors and a small representation from accreditation membership organizations. All accrediting agencies were focused on both QA and QE activities to some degree. Overall, the majority of all agencies leaned more toward a QE focus; where programmatic agencies tended to have a more defined focus on either QA or QE and institutional accreditors tended to focus more on both QA and QE.

Quantitative Results and Analysis

The Role of Social Justice in Quality Assurance and Accreditation

To follow-up on insights from the interviews, survey participants were asked questions related to how they saw the relationship between social justice and QAA. Ultimately, As illustrated in Chart 4.1, when asked if there was a role for social justice in QAA, the majority of respondents (71%) indicated there was a role; while 19% said no, and 10% indicated they did not know.

Chart 4.1: Is there a role of Social Justice in QAA?
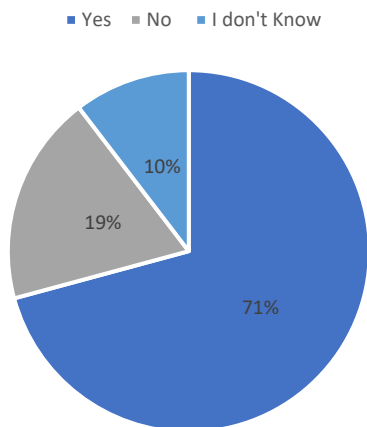
Chart 4.2: Is there a role for social justice in quality assurance/accreditation?
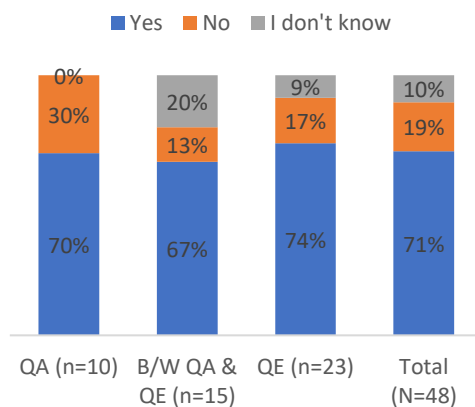
Further analysis, indicated that there were slight differences in respondents based on QA/QE focus. For example, of the 71% of respondents who indicated there is a role for social justice with QAA, agencies that identified as quality enhancement focused agencies were more likely to indicate yes (74%) as displayed in Chart 4.2. To go a step further beyond whether there is a role for social justice in quality assurance and accreditation, respondents were asked specifically if social justice should be incorporated into quality assessments. Slighly less than half (46%) of the respondents agreed that social justice should be used in quality assessments as illustrated in Chart 4.3.

Chart 4.3: Should Agencies Incorporate
Social Justice Into Quality
Assessments?
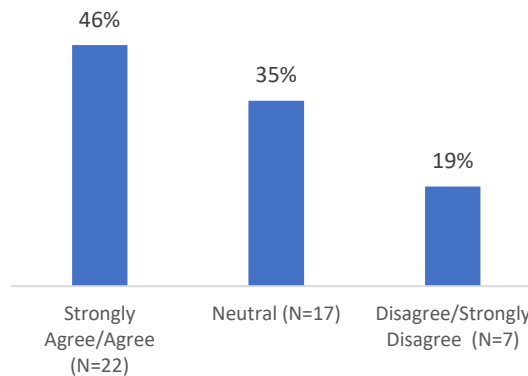
Overall, most respondents indicated that there is a role for social justice to play in QAA. Furthermore, almost half of the respondents noted that social justice should play a role in the how quality assessment are made. The following section provides a picture of how social justice elements are being realized by accrediting agencies.

Social Justice and Accreditation Activities

Accrediting agencies were engaged in a number of formal and informal activities in order to carry out the work of the accreditation process, ranging from setting standards and decision-making to internal professional development activities. Building on questions related to the role of social justice in quality assessments, participants responded to a series of questions regarding their agency's activities. They were provided with a common list of activities that take place within accrediting agencies and then asked to how social justice is realized within their agencies. Chart 4.4 reflects the responses to the initial question regarding common activities.

Chart 4.4: Current Accreditation Accreditation Activities that Reflect
Attention to Social Justice

Activity	Percentage (Count)
Accrditation Standards, Policies & Procedures	81% (30)
Internal Policies & Procedures	51% (19)
Stakeholder Feedback from the Field	41% (15)
Professional Development for Staff	41% (15)
Professional Development for Volunteers	38% (14)
Informal Communications	38% (14)
Advocacy	32% (12)
Non-Public/Internal Communications	32% (12)
Educational Resources for Accredited Members	32% (12)
Other	14% (5)

A decided majority of participants (77%; n=37) provided responses, where attention to social justice was reflected most in their accreditation standards, policies, and procedures (SPPs) (81%), followed by internal policies and procedures (51%); stakeholder feedback from the field and professional development for staff (41%), and informal communication and professional development for volunteers (38%). Advocacy, non-public/informal communications, and educational resources were the least popular activities (32%). To further explore agencies use of SPPs, respondents were asked about SPPs standards, and/or informal expectations around various social justice issues. Respondents were provided with a list of social justice issues and asked to identify all that applied to their agency's SPPs. Approximately 90% (n=43) of all respondents provided responses. As highlighted in Chart 4.5, responses reflected that diversity (84%), anti-discrimination (63%), inclusion (63%), access (54%) and equity (44% which combines digital, social, and health) were the most popular elements included.

Chart 4.5: Standards, Policies, Procedures and Informal Expectations

Category	Percentage (Count)
Diversity	84% (36)
Anti-discrimination	63% (27)
Inclusion	63% (27)
Access	54% (23)
Gender Disparities	35% (15)
Anti-racism	35% (15)
Socieconomic Disparities	33% (14)
Physical/Mental Disabilities	28% (12)
Health Disparaties	28% (12)
Faith-Based Discrimination	26% (11)
Social Equity	26% (11)
Digital Equity	16% (7)
Health Equity	2% (1)
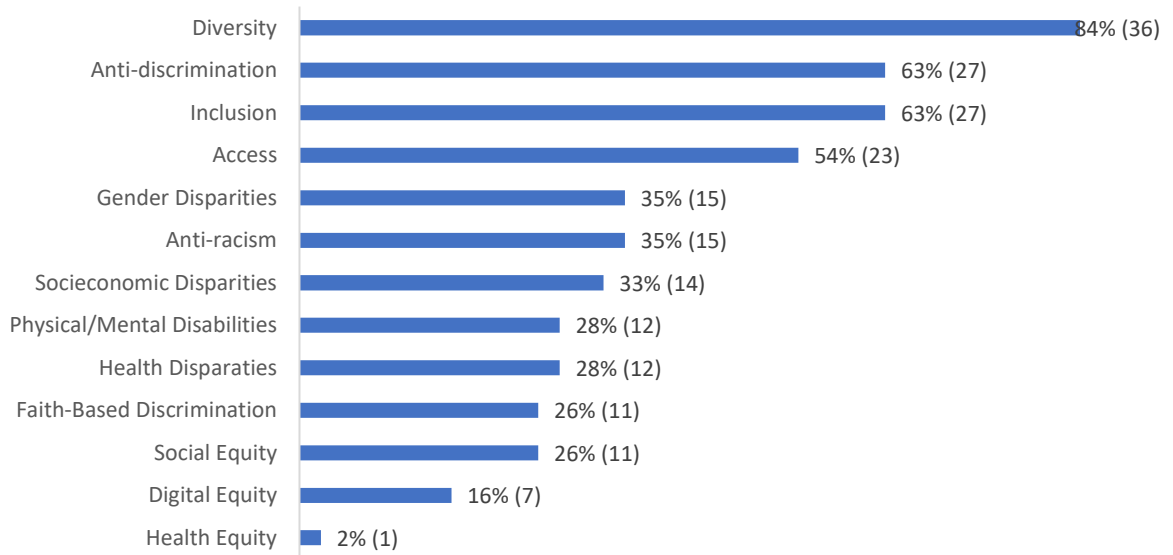
Moreover, given the timing of the survey, participants were asked about institutional racism. As noted earlier, the survey was fielded in the summer of 2020 following months of social unrest in the US and calls from the public to address systemic racism across all facets of society. Participants were asked if their agencies had been asked by their stakeholders, (members of the public, the government, academic programs, institutions, students, employers, professional associations, etc) to respond to social justice issues (Chat 4.6). All 48 survey participants responded with 50% answering "yes" and 44% saying "no" to this general question.

Chart 4.6 Agencies being asked to address social justice issues by
stakeholders
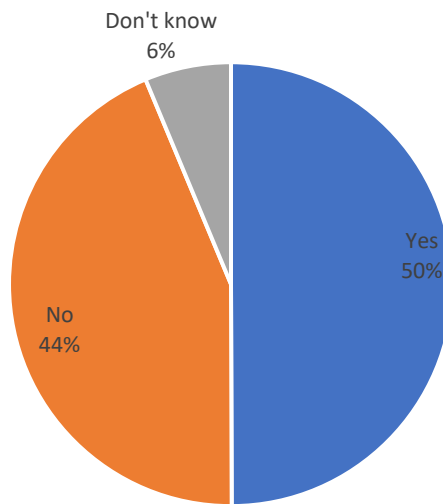
Furthermore, participants were asked a question specifically related to stakeholder calls
to address systemic/institutional racism. Respondents were provided with a list of activities and
asked to select any activities that were applicable to their agencies. All 48 participants responded
to the question. The activities are highlighted below in Chart 4.7. The most popular response was
to create or expand committees, task forces, or workgroups to address the issues (46%) followed
by agencies making organizational statements to address issues (42%). Professional
development for volunteers, staff, and membership was utilized by 33% of respondents.
Additionally, just over a fourth (27%) of respondents noted that their agencies either made
changes to standards, policies or procedures; created/expanded and distributed educational
resources to their member; or began collecting data on the issue. Conversely, 23% of the
agencies that were asked by stakeholders to respond to institutional racism indicated that their
agencies did not respond, and 2% responded that they did not know what their agencies did.

Chart 4.7: Agency response to calls to address systemic/institutional racism

Category	Value
Creation or expansion of committees, task forces, and/or work groups, etc.	46% (22)
Organizational Statements	42% (20)
Professional development for staff, membership, and/or QAA volunteers	33% (16)
Creation, development and/or distribution of educational resources	25% (25)
Changes in quality or accreditation standards, policies & procedures	25% (12)
No or I Don't Know	25% (12)

Chart 4.8 highlights agency responses to calls address institutional racism depending on the QE and/or QA focus of the accrediting agency. Overall, agencies focused on QE indicated participated in activities more than QA focused agencies as highlighted in Chart 4.8 with the exception of data collection. Agencies that noted data collection as a response were represented more by agencies having a QA focus which was the most represented activity by this group. QE or dually (QE and QA) focused agencies participated in all of the activities listed; however, QA focused agencies did not participate in changes to standards. Moreover, of the respondents that indicated that their agencies took no action, QA focused agencies were most represented (33%).

4.8 Agency response to address systemic/institutional racism based on QE and/or QA focus

QE (n=23) ◼ B/W QA & QE (n=15) ◼ QA (n=9)

Category	QE	B/W QA & QE	QA
I don't know	4%	0%	0%
Nothing	17%	27%	33%
Organizational statements	57%	40%	11%
Data collection	26%	13%	33%
Professional development for staff, member, and/or…	48%	20%	22%
Creation or expansion of committees, taskforces, working…	48%	40%	33%
Creation, development, and/or distribution of educational…	43%	7%	11%
Commission of research	17%	7%	0%
Changes in quality or accreditation standards	39%	20%	0%

Chart 4.9 further highlights the activities according to an agency's recognition status. Agencies not recognized by CHEA or USDE (63%) created task forces or expanded committees more compared to only about 50% of CHEA recognized agencies. Agencies recognized by the USDE only were the least likely to create or expand committees with only 23% indicating this action. On the other hand, organizational statements, the second most popular activity, was indicated by more USDE only recognized agencies (55%) followed by agencies recognized by both USDE and CHEA (44%). There was no significant difference by recognition type for professional development activities. Finally, changes to accreditation SPPs, the least popular activity indicated by respondents, were most likely to be made by unrecognized agencies (38%) of these agencies followed by agencies that were dually recognized (31%). Agencies solely recognized by CHEA (17%) were the least represented in this activity.

Chart 4.9 Accreditation Response Activities by Agency Type
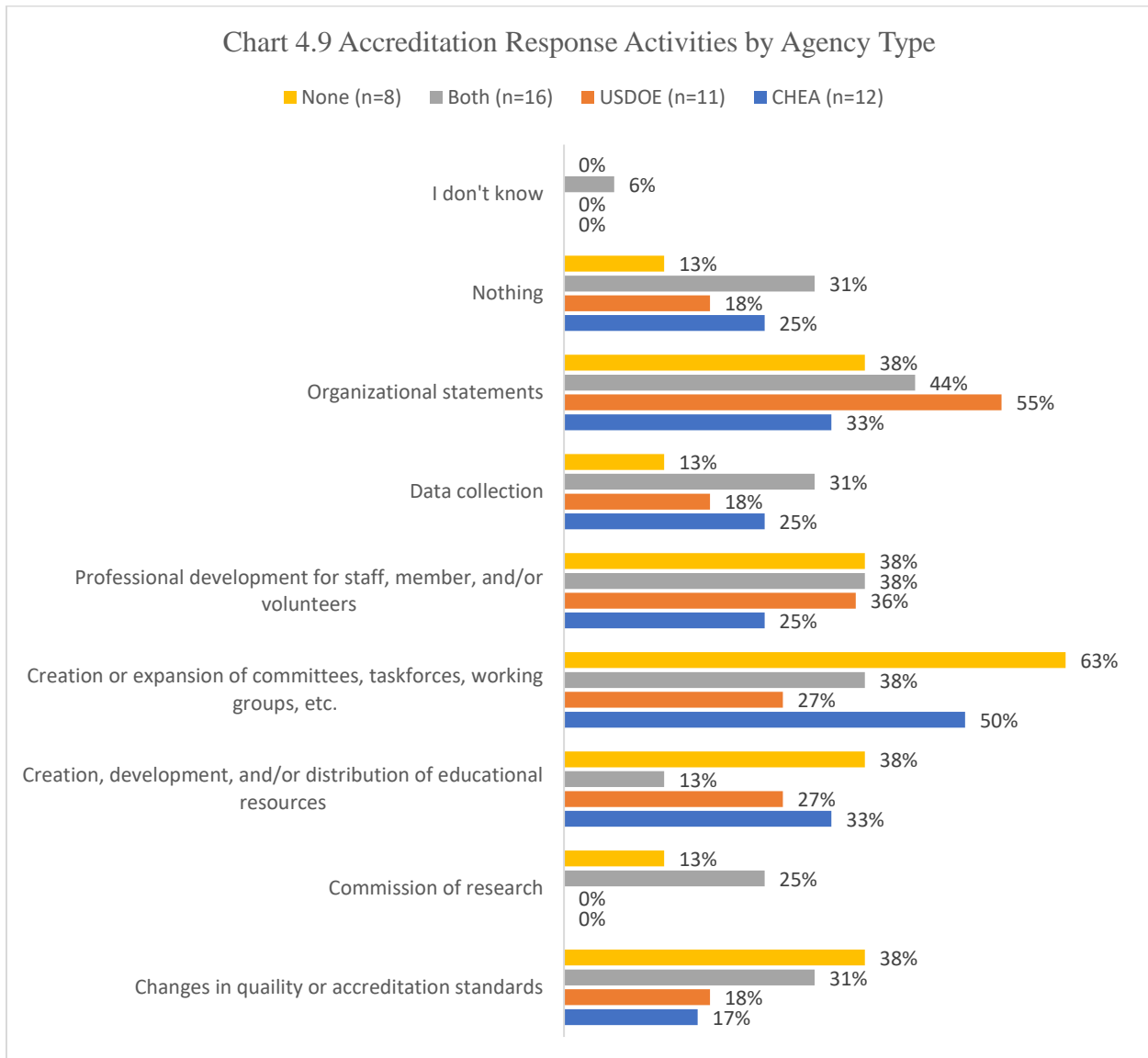
What More Can Be Done

One of the aims of this study was to solicit input from the QAA community in order to provide some guidance on how agencies could be more attentive to social justice issues. As such, the study survey included two questions to solicit feedback on *what* types activities and *how* agencies might be more attentive. The following section includes results and analysis for the quantitive responses and the qualitative responses to the *how* question will be described further with the qualitative results. Specifically, participants were asked "What activities do you think organizations might consider to help programs and/or institutions facilitate more attention to social justice issues?" They were provided with a list of seven activities and asked to check all

that applied. The results are highlighted in Chart 4.10. Additionally, the analysis has been broken down to include the recognition type for the responses. The activities identified by respondents most popular to least included the sharing of best practices, being the most popular (81%), followed closely by the training and professional development for staff and volunteers (76%); then the development and revision of accreditation SPPs (56%); defining social justice and developing and revising internal policies and procedures (51%); the establishment of data reporting requirements; and lastly the solicitation of greater stakeholder involvement in the accreditation process (38%).

Chart 4.10 Activities Organizations Might Consider

Activity	Percentage (Count)
Sharing of best practices	80% (36)
Training and professional development for staff and volunteers	76% (34)
Developing and/or revising accreditation standards, policies, and/or procedures	56% (25)
Defining social justice	51% (23)
Developing and revising internal organizational policies and procedures	51% (23)
Establishing data reporting requirements	47% (21)
Soliciting greater involvement of programmatic and institutional stakeholders	38% (17)

Additionally, in terms of activities, Charts 4.11 includes activities for consideration according to their recognition type, since the qualitative data indicated the willingness or apprehensiveness to act based on recognition factors. As noted in Chart 4.11, the sharing of best practices was the most popular activity noted by respondents. In this case, non-recognized agencies (100%) were most represented for this activity followed by USDE only recognized agencies. Training and development, the second most popular activity, was favored more by USDE only recognized agencies (100%). The development and revision of accreditation SPPs was favored equally by respondents. As for defining social justice, this activity was most selected by unrecognized (63%) and CHEA (58%) only recognized agencies. USDE only

recognized agencies were the least likely to have participated in this activity (40%). Finally, the use of data was an activity most selected by those agencies dually recognized by USDE and CHEA (67%) followed by USDE only recognized (40%) and non-recognized agencies (25%) being the least represented for this activity.

Chart 4:11 Activities Organizations Might Consider by Recognition Type
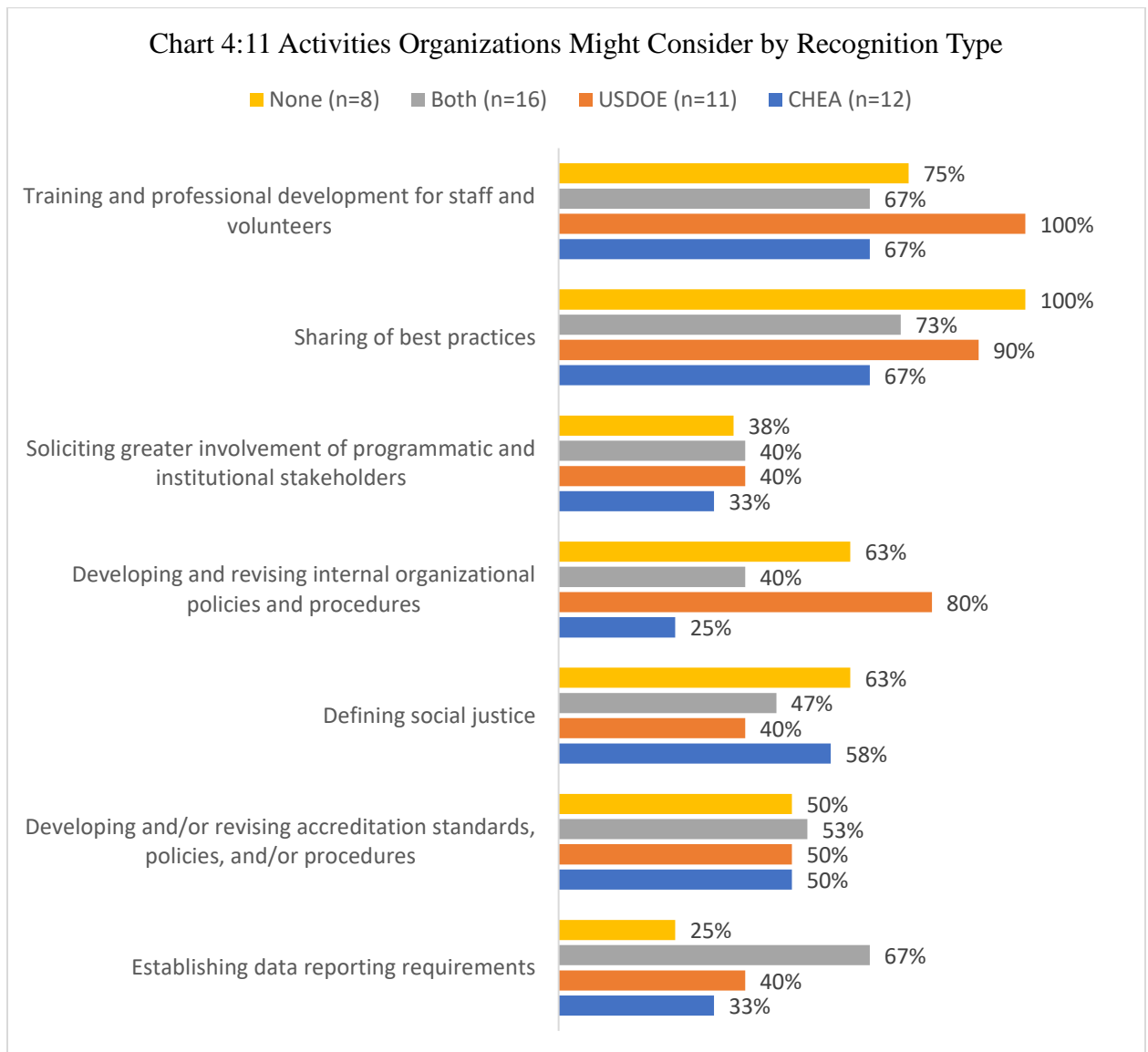
Quantitative Results Summary

The quantitive results were accompanied by several charts to illustrate key highlights taken from the data analysis. Overall, results indicated that the majority of agencies (71%) feel that there is a role for social justice to play within accreditation and almost have noted that social should be incorporated in the quality assessments. Furthermore, the results show that agencies

with more of a QE focus (74%) were slightly more likely than those with a QA focus to agree that social justice has a role in accreditation. In terms of activities that agencies were involved, social justice shows up mostly through the use of agencies' SPPs followed by internal policies and procedures. Specifically, as it relates to SPPs, agencies indicated that they have SPPs on diversity (84%) which was most represented followed by inclusion and anti-discrimination (63%); access (54%) followed by equity (42%). When asked about specifically about agency responses to institutional racism, respondents noted that their agencies responded in several ways including with the creation or expansion of taskforces or committees as the most popular activity followed by organizational public statements, and staff and volunteer professional development training. Changes related to accreditation SPPs were the least noted area for which agencies responded; and of these respondents, non-recognized agencies were most represented. Additionally, when asked about activities agencies could undertake to incorporate social justice in their work, the sharing of best practices was the most popular activity noted. Similar to responses received about actions take to combat institutional racism, professional development for staff and volunteers was also one of the top three suggested activities. Other top activities included were adjusting accreditation standards, defining social justice, using data, and the incorporation of more stakeholder involvement were all other activities included and listed by popularity.

Summary

The presentation of findings in this chapter began with the emergent themes from the HER interviews and focus groups followed by the presentation of the quantitive findings resulting from analysis of survey data. Most agencies do not have a common reference point about what is meant by social justice but for many their understandings of social justice were grounded in issues related to race and equity. Most agencies do see the importance of including social justice into quality assessments and see their roles as contributing to leveling the playing field or supporting equity in various ways. Results indicated that agencies with quality enhancement focuses are more likely to see the role of social justice in accreditation and that quality enhancement efforts by agencies may allow more flexibility to incorporate more SJ elements as highlighted in interviews. The primary way in which agencies incorporate social justice into their oversight responsibilities is through the use of accreditation SPPs and internal

policies and procedures. Diversity; anti-discrimination and inclusion; access and equity were the leading social justice issues addressed by agencies through accreditation SPPs. Results also indicated that when responding to specific issue – institutional racism; all agencies responded with activities including the creation or expansion of taskforces and committees as the most popular activity and changes to policies and procedures being the least popular response. Overall, most agencies are incorporating social justice elements into their practices. The following chapter will delve deeper into the findings by providing more interpretation and contextualization of the combined results.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Chapter Overview

This chapter will expand on the results and findings presented in chapter 4 by discussing how the results answer the study's research questions. The chapter will provide a brief recap of the study's context followed by an in-depth discussion of the findings using Fraser's social justice framework as a lens. This second portion of the chapter presents discussion related to the applications and implications of the findings which includes challenges faced by QAA agencies, lessons learned from the SA context, recommendations for practice and the introduction of the "how-to" guidelines for practice. The chapter concludes with a brief summary and preview of chapter 6.

Context for Discussion

Although much debate still exists regarding the purpose of HE, whether it be to advance economic goals or to the serve public good; HE is seen as a way to contribute to the well-being of society either economically and/or socially. Given the increasing demands on HE and the increasing number of and complexity of societal problems, this study sought to examine how US HEIs could aid in helping to address societal issues. Specifically, the study examined the role of QAA in facilitating attention to social justice issues by HEIs. QAA systems have tremendous influence on national HE agendas as well as HE institutional priorities (Singh, 2010). As such, the study had the following aims: to investigate how US accrediting agencies are integrating social justice concerns into their oversight of the academic units (institutions and/programs); to collect lessons learned from members of the US and SA QAA communities regarding their efforts; and 3.) to provide recommendations and the foundation for draft "how-to" guidelines to assist on what more can be done to move agencies forward with facilitating attention to social justice outcomes by HEIs. Additionally, I looked to Nancy Fraser's (2009) argument that progressive and normative notions of social justice require a three-dimensional approach to social justice including redistribution (economic); recognition (cultural) and representation (political) to guide me through various aspects of the study.

It is important to note that the study was not a comparative study between the US and SA

QAA systems. The US was chosen because it is my professional context. The South African

higher education system including its national higher education agenda, institutions, and QAA

framework were highlighted for their intentional attention to social justice outcomes (Badat,

2010; McMillan, Goodman & Schmid, 2016). As such, SA was chosen, because I believed there

to be value in learning more about SA's intentional efforts to introduce social justice priorities

into its HE system, given some of the similar social justice issues faced between the US and SA,

specifically around racial inequalities. Additionally, it is important to note the timing of the

study. The study began at beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and amid social unrest in the

US. During this time, the awareness of social justice issues specifically around race and

inequalities was heightened as well as a collective willingness to address issues.

Understanding Social Justice and the Role of Social Justice in Quality Judgements

The concept of quality is somewhat subjective and contextually dependent (Elssay, 2015)

and is highly debated. Similarly, social justice in the context of HE has been a topic that has

spurred much discussion over the years; however, the relationship between quality in HE and

social justice have not received as much attention as noted in chapter 2**.** In using Fraser's

concept of social justice as my lens (see Figure 2.2), I began the data collection with the mindset

of getting an understanding about how people within the QAA community viewed social justice

and the role of social justice in assessing quality.

Understanding Social Justice

I found that most participants had various understandings of social justice and that most

agencies lacked a common reference point for social justice. This is could potentially cause some

to be stymied in terms of how to move forward with efforts or prioritize; however, as guided by

Nancy Fraser's work and critical theory, the fact that most agencies do not define social justice

differently is not problematic, since having a definition is more of a surface issue, since this

school of thought is more concerned with examining and challenging existing institutions. On the

other hand, it was important for me learn about participants understandings regarding social

justice since they had implications for how agencies see their roles and the activities conducted

by agencies as well as their overall attention to social justice efforts.

As noted in the results, race and equity were foundational components of participants understanding of social justice which is influenced by the historical, political and socioeconomic context of the US. As such, agencies acknowledgement of historical inequalities aligns with Fraser's recognition dimension. Recognition involves the identification and acknowledgment of the claims of historically marginalized groups (Fraser, 2009). In reviewing the data, some agencies were aware of the issues impacting marginalized groups. As indicated in the findings, in both the US and SA discussions, there was widespread acknowledgement of socially, economically, and politically challenging issues experienced by marginalized groups, specifically related to racial discrimination. In particular, the efforts in SA were targeted at racial redress for past discrimination and exclusion of blacks under the apartheid system. For the US, much discussion around social justice included racial discrimination and equity. This was acknowledged in conversations regarding the historical context for many of the issues in the US. For example, one agency representative suggested, "Given our history of focusing on marginalized groups… you have to be willing as an organization to acknowledge that there are injustices and make changes" (P6). Additionally, survey responses showed that agencies are willing to acknowledge and respond to issues related institutional racism and that elements of social justice are included in agencies' standards, policies, and procedures with the most prominent elements being diversity; anti-discrimination and inclusion; access; and equity. Unsurprisingly, the acknowledgement of the QAA community is aligned with historical and global conversations about social justice and HE which too have involved equality, equity and access. Overall, QAA agencies in both countries indicated an understanding of social justice that aligns with Fraser's (2009) recognition dimension.

QAA's Role

Most people saw a role for agencies in aiding institutions in achieving social justice outcomes by helping to level the playing field. In particular, the data highlighted some accreditors' belief that QAA has the ability to influence or create opportunities to make conditions better for those who have been historically marginalized as it relates to leveling the playing field. One participant noted that agencies can play a role in how they develop their criteria to ensure equity across all underrepresented groups and socioeconomic levels" (P2) and another indicated that agencies "have a responsibility to support groups and to help education

level the playing field a little bit" (P7). This leveling of the playing field concept aligns with some of the social purposes of higher education to serve the public good and to refocus their energies on contributing to the cultural, economic, and social benefits of individuals as argued by Henard (2016) and Shapiro (2009). The contribution to the leveling the playing field was evidenced through agencies' responses to requests to address institutional racism as an issue. Based on the survey, participants noted that they were asked by their stakeholders to address issues of institutional racism within their accreditation scopes. It is most likely that stakeholders were influenced by social events, and it is unclear if the agency responses would have reflected such timely or intentional reactions to stakeholder requests prior to the 2020 social unrest. Even still, it is clear that accreditors do feel they have a role to play when it comes to social justice which aligns with Fraser's notion of redistribution and recognition.

According to Fraser (2009), redistribution refers to access to resources and the potential outcomes that arise from access (Fraser, 2009). It is important to note that the act of supporting the leveling of the playing field has to be coupled with recognition or acknowledgement that this need exists. This is underscored by Fraser (2009) through her advocacy for each dimension of the framework to reinforce the other. As it relates this study, the leveling of the playing field has been historically done through higher education policies that promote equality, equity, and access to higher education (Singh, 2011). Singh (2011) noted that the role of HE in social fairness and equity were evidenced by social justice gains associated with expanded access or massification—the rapidly increasing numbers of students enrolled in higher education (Hornsby & Osman, 2014). However, Singh (2011) noted that despite the trends regarding social justice and higher education, particularly in highly industrialized countries like South Africa, that access alone is not enough to achieve social justice outcomes (Singh, 2011).

In looking at the results, the data highlighted that attention to access, diversity and equity are how QAA agencies are attempting to level the playing field and provide the overarching access to opportunities which is reflective of the larger higher education community. As noted earlier, equity is one of the key elements related to participants understanding of social justice. Additionally, the findings suggests that access, diversity and inclusion are also integral to people's understanding of social justice since these concepts are interrelated with the intention of leveling the playing field. For example, access is often discussed in the context of HE with regard to incorporating social justice especially as it relates to social fairness and patterns of

equity (e.g., equitable student access) (Singh, 2011). Moreover, Carnoy (2005) noted that issues of access and equity have become intensified due to the demands of HE because of increasing HE enrolments. As it relates to QA and access, Blanco-Ramirez and Berger (2014) argued for improving quality in HE by linking quality with relevance, access and investments. The study found that when discussing social justice and standards, attention to access was identified by more than half (54%) of participants as being included in their standards and formal and informal expectations.

Although access is one of the most common elements for social justice strategies it is important for QAA agencies to note that access alone may not automatically reduce societal inequalities but may reproduce inequities (Singh, 2011), which aligns with Fraser's (2009) argument that redistribution or one dimension must be accompanied by the other dimensions. For example, in examining data from SA where an access agenda was prominent, there was acknowledgement that more student support is needed beyond access to ensure students are successfully and are ready to enter society. In particular, the focus on language as a component of social justice was highlighted in the SA data. The connection between social justice and language in the context of higher education is access (Mwaniki, 2012). Due to the historical, political, and cultural implications of language in SA, it remains an important issue within SA's social justice agenda (Mwaniki, 2012). Access is a focus area for achieving social justice outcomes related to equity; however, access alone may not be enough to achieve outcomes as highlighted by SA findings. As such, the QAA community's role in contributing to leveling the playing field must not only take issues of access and equity in account, but they will have to continue to expand on efforts related to equity, inclusion, and student success in conjunction with the other dimensions to be meaningfully integrated into overall organizational and institutional strategies to achieve social justice outcomes. To further expand of how agencies are translating their roles into action, the following sections discuss in more detail how agencies are facilitating attention to social justice.

Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Social Justice in Practice

As noted previously, most accreditors see a role for social justice in the judgements of quality and have been asked to respond to social justice issues by their stakeholders. The survey data revealed that agencies are including social justice into their assessments of quality mainly

through the development and implementation of accreditation standards, policies, and procedures (SPPs) followed by their use of internal policies and procedures (e.g., recruitment, selection, and evaluation of volunteer policies); the solicitation of stakeholder feedback from the public or professional fields; and professional development activities for staff and volunteers.

Accreditation Standards, Policies, and Procedures

The data revealed that the use of accreditation SPPs is an important way for agencies to incorporate social justice expectations in practice. Interviews revealed that SPPs were central in how agencies operationalized attention to SJ as well and this was underscored with 81% percent of survey respondents noting that their agency incorporated social justice elements into their practices through their SPPs. It is not surprising that SPPs would be the most popular activity given the central role that SPPs play for accrediting agencies. Accreditation standards may include the specific criteria for which institutions and/or programs must meet and the evaluation policies and procedures (CHEA n.d.). For example, both USDE and CHEA recognized accrediting agencies must include certain elements in their standards (including attention to mission; governance and administration; faculty; facility and library resources; student support; teaching and learning, student learning outcomes resources) and undergo a regular comprehensive review of their standards (Kelchen, 2017; CHEA, 2019). Thus, there are similarities across US agencies' accreditation SPPs, but agencies may incorporate social justice into their standards in various ways.

As noted by Rubaii (2016) and Nora (2021) earlier, standards have the potential to influence and/or promote social justice issues like diversity, equity, and inclusion specifically using standards. Rubaii (2016) noted that accreditation standards can advance social equity goals. Furthermore, Nora (2021) argued for accreditation standards in the context of medical education, to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts within schools by standards that facilitate schools describing their efforts; considering additional continuous quality improvements and ways to achieve their institutional goals around DEI (Nora, 2021).

Diversity, inclusion, and access were highlighted in the qualitative data when discussing the understanding social justice; however, issues around race and equity were most prominently highlighted as a foundational element for agencies understanding of social justice and attention. When asked about what types of SPPs in place, respondents indicated that diversity (84%), anti-

discrimination (63%), inclusion (63%), access (54%), and equity (44%) as focus areas. This was not a surprise, considering there is a relationship between the concepts of equity and social justice that have been at the forefront of HE policy discussions for the last couple of decades. Additionally, as noted earlier in the discussion, the concepts are interrelated with social justice acting as an umbrella concept directly related to providing better opportunities for leveling the playing field.

Another highlight from findings was the focus on student success. As noted by Brennan and Naidoo (2008), HE has both an import and export role (2008). They argued that the import role relates to access and the export role looks at how HE contributes to equity and social justice across society through their graduates. Traditionally, HE imports social justice and equity agendas from the larger society and thus acts in ways that will improve its performance in these areas (Brennan & Naidoo, 2008). As such, this aligns with the focus on access and student success noted in the data and in relation to Fraser's (2009) redistribution dimension of social justice. Student success within HE, especially in the US, is fueled in many ways by the pressure and demands for accountability primarily through accreditation standards and expectations of (Wallace & Wallace, 2016). In the context of the study, continued efforts at supporting and advocating attention to factors related to student success is an opportunity to impact social outcomes related to as it relates to underrepresented or marginalized students.

In discussing other elements of the standards including DEI and student success, there was also particular focus on curriculum that is worth mentioning. The curriculum is at the center of the learning and the academic evaluation conducted by accrediting agencies. Many universities have sought to promote achieving social justice initiatives directly through concentrations on curriculum as noted by Barnett (2020) in a review of the literature on the institution's use of DEI. As such, it aligns with accreditors focus on curriculum as an area for evaluation. In particular, interviews revealed that there is a relationship between social justice elements and certain areas of curricula or professional competencies. For many programmatic/specialized accreditors, standards are accompanied by professional competencies and is an area of focus for social justice efforts as highlighted in the data. Professional competencies are those skills and knowledge areas that are necessary to practice in a profession (University of Victoria, n.d.) and are achieved as a result of going through a specific curriculum. One could argue that the achievement of competencies by students is related to the export notion

of HE articulated by Brennan and Naidoo (2009), since social justice outcomes might be directly translated to the curriculum and professional competency expectations. They argued that the export role looks at how HE contributes to equity and social justice across society through graduates. Furthermore, the notion that the curriculum and professional standards are a place to focus social justice efforts aligns with recommendations made by Smedley et al (2004) for medical education accreditation. They recommended that agencies take a more active role in increasing racial and ethnic diversity in the health professions through the inclusion of professional core competencies related to social justice issues, such as cultural competency, racial and ethnic issues and diversity into their overall accreditation standards (Smedley et al, 2004). Although this study did not delve deeper into the specific core competencies held by agencies, there is a potential for social justice efforts to be more connected to professional competencies. Overall, the data shows that accreditation standards are a powerful way in which agencies are integrating attention to social justice issues into their quality expectations and can be a way to positively impact social justice outcomes according to (Smedley et al, 2004; Nora, 2021).

What influences Standards, Policies, and Procedures?

Agencies have chosen to infuse social justice expectations in various ways, and this is influenced by a number of factors including, but not limited to the agencies' values; leadership; volunteer and staff composition; institutional or programmatic priorities; and/or contemporary issues in higher education professional/specialized areas if applicable, and society. For example, one participant noted that the leadership and the decision-making body guides and informs standards-setting, decision-making, and agency priorities. As noted in the interviews, the individuals that make up an organization influence how the accreditation process is managed, specifically, the leadership, which in cases of accrediting agencies is often made up of volunteers. One respondent noted that "you have to have people committed to those ideas" (P6) referring to social justice issues. This is significant because volunteers and staff serve a vital role by conducting the accreditation process. Staff manage volunteers by providing important information to volunteers to guide decision-making, and act as liaisons between the accrediting agency and the institutions and/or programs that they accredit. Volunteer decisions regarding expectations are influenced by their individual interpretations of SPPs as well as their values

(Leviro, 1989). As such, the underlying assumptions of the leadership and volunteers influence the standards and has important implications since it means that agencies must be thoughtful about their recruitment and selection so that the priorities of the agencies are accomplished.

Additionally, standards also reflected what is happening at institutional levels as well as professions and disciplines. As noted by Participant 8, the accreditor standards and policies are sometimes influenced by institutional directions on issues. For example, "we have some systems of schools that are very intentional… who we accredit [and] our leader in reducing equity gaps and that helps infuse itself back into the accreditor. If you've got a large number of significant institutions that have a shared direction. You can work with them on those issues" (P8).

Lastly, standards are influenced by the issues that are taking place in the field and in HE, as evidenced by responses to the question around changes made in response to institutional racism. Agencies often go through a systematic review of standards and solicit stakeholder feedback during the process so the public including universities, students, organizations within HE or the professions weigh in on what or how standards should be shaped. This provides an opportunity for agencies to ensure that their standards are relevant and timely. Additionally, stakeholder feedback reflects societal concerns. In particular, the stakeholder feedback regarding standards and policies is highlighted in agency responses to calls to address institutional racism. Over half (56%) of agencies surveyed responded that they took some type of action in response to address institutional racism. Of these agencies, almost 46% of agencies indicated that actions by them included changes to their accreditation standards and policies and/or the formation tasks groups/ expanded committees in response to the public calls for action.

Other Activities

In addition to accreditation standards, the data showed that agencies were also notably involved in the following activities.

Professional Development Activities for Volunteers and Staff.

Professional development or training of volunteers and staff was also indicated as a way that agencies have incorporated attention to social justice into their activities. This is a significant activity since accrediting agencies could not accomplish their mission and objectives without volunteers and staff. Although the study did not go into specific detail about professional development, it was noted that volunteer training is important in implementing and evaluating

compliance with SPPs, since volunteers serve as peer reviewers and are at the heart of the accreditation process with responsibilities for making assessments and decisions as well as setting standards. Volunteer decisions are influenced by various individual interpretations of the agencies' SPPs, value judgements (Levrio, 1989), and their underlying assumptions. Additionally, staff members are important as they support agency work by influencing standard and policy setting; managing volunteers; providing information to support decision-making, and liaising directly accredited institutions and programs, and the public.

Internal Policies and Procedures.

Agencies utilized internal policies and procedures to promote social justice efforts. For example, internal policies may include volunteer and staff recruitment, selection, and evaluation policies. According to the survey data, internal policies and procedures were the second most popular (following accreditation SPPs) activity in which agencies incorporated social justice. Internal policies and procedures are extremely important as they influence how the operationalization of organizational policies; development and implementation of standards and expectations; and development and execution of agency strategies. As noted earlier, the composition and underlying values of the volunteers impacts the accreditation SPPs as well as the implementation of policies and procedures. Volunteers serve a vital role in carrying out the work of US accrediting agencies. As such, it is extremely important to make sure that volunteers are aligned with organizational mission, values, and goals as noted in the results. For example, some respondents noted that their organizations routinely looked at the composition of their volunteer corps as it relates to diversity, equity, and inclusion to ensure that the agencies leadership is representative of the general population and the professions the agency serves. This aspect of agency's efforts is aligned with Fraser's (2009) representation dimension as it relates to marginalized individuals or groups active participation in the decision-making process. As such, volunteer participation is an extremely important avenue for assisting in advancing social justice efforts. Despite references to volunteer composition of agencies, this was not deeply explored in the study. The data collected did not specifically ask about the demographic composition and make-up of agency staff and/or decision-making bodies.

Solicitation of Stakeholder Feedback.

As part of most accreditors' processes, there are mechanisms for them to provide feedback to the agency regarding SPPs. This feedback is intended to assist the accrediting agencies ensuring that quality standards are current, appropriate, and relevant. Stakeholder feedback may be solicited during a comprehensive review process, but it may be solicited informally as well, as the public is viewed as one of its major stakeholders. As noted in the findings, this is the third most popular activity (41%) in which agencies are paying attention to social justice by providing opportunities for their members and the public to provide feedback on their SPPs. As an example, the power of stakeholder feedback was reflected in agency responses to calls for public action on institutional racism. Over one half of accrediting agencies noted that they made changes or took action regarding how they carried out their oversight responsibilities with reference to institutional racism further supporting the data that the QAA community has a role to play in helping to societal address issues. Accrediting agencies' actions to address issues outside of the scope of traditional accreditation concerns seem to echo Cruz's (2009) argument that quality within HE needs to be considered within the specific context in which institutions operate and account for the role that HE has in helping to solve societal issues. Additionally, the attentiveness to institutional racism by agencies seems to be reflective of the larger conversations in the QAA community, which call for expanded meanings of quality to include more consideration of social justice, equity, inequality, and freedom of speech (CHEA, 2019).

Based on the findings, agencies are engaged in several activities that reflect the incorporation of social justice into either their practices. This is meaningful because it reflects a move away from more traditional accountability focus toward ideas of quality that include more social considerations; however, there is still more to be done specifically around the "other activities" described in this section. As noted earlier, the recognition and redistribution dimensions of Fraser's (2009) framework align as illustrated in how agency's understand social justice, their agency roles, and their use of accreditation standards as the primary focal areas for social justice elements. However, this section noted a number of "other activities" where social justice is promoted in agency activities. In particular, these activities align with elements related to Fraser's (2009) representation dimension. Representation refers to the rights of individuals and groups to have their voices heard in debates about social justice and injustice and to actively participate in decision making (Fraser, 2009). In investigating the activities of QAA communities, the representation dimension is the area of Fraser's approach that received the least

amount of attention. Although the data highlighted some attention to the composition and recruitment of agency volunteers and staff that shared an awareness and understanding of issues, it is not clear if individuals who are impacted from accreditors' efforts are actively engaged in conversations or decisions. Findings indicated that having people who are aligned with social justice issues at agencies is important; however, the decision-making process as it relates to assessments of quality are primarily left to appointed or elected volunteers of agencies. For example, students are at the heart of many accreditor activities centered around DEI and student success initiatives; however, direct student representation on accrediting boards is rare. Student feedback is solicited during the accreditation process via participation in the institutional self-study process; however, student involvement may rarely go beyond this.

Additionally, representation may be achieved through the solicitation of feedback from interested parties as aforementioned. Specifically, when asked about how they responded to social justice issue of institutional racism, 41% survey respondents that took action indicated that the solicitation of stakeholder feedback (41%) was an activity that they conducted. However, it is important to note that stakeholder feedback may not always include those impacted by the agencies SPPs. It is unclear and seems unlikely that most agencies are receiving stakeholder feedback or providing voices to all groups impacted by their agencies' work. In terms of representation, accreditors should do more to solicit specific feedback and to actively have relevant participants involved in the decision-making processes, especially since this may be an easier task than creating, developing, or implementing SPPs, especially in response to real-time demands from stakeholders. It is also important to note that this study did not explore the demographic make-up of the accrediting agencies represented; however, analysis of this data may have helped to provide more insight into the representation dimension. Overall, stepping up "other activities" coupled with reinforcement of accreditation SPPs may provide an opportunity for agencies to strengthen their efforts for social justice from Fraser's representation standpoint.

Quality Assurance and Quality Enhancement Influence

In addition to "other activities", the study also sought to see if there were in differences in how an agency's focus on quality assurance or quality enhancement influenced how and whether agencies incorporated social justice into their activities. Similar to quality and social justice, there are many debates about what is meant by the concept of quality in the context of HE. QA and QE are concepts used in HE, when discussing quality, but each places a different emphasis

on quality in HEI. Williams (2016) noted that definitions of these terms are used as catchall

terms based on time, context, and the stakeholders involved. The terms are generally used to

describe all forms of external quality monitoring, specifically when discussing quality

enhancement. For this study, I referred to QA in the general sense to indicate external quality

monitoring; however, during the data collection and findings, I noted a distinction between the

QA and QE. For example, when asking respondents about differences in activities based on a

QA or QE focus, QA was aligned with compliance and QE with quality improvement.

Biggs (2001) noted that QA falls into two categories, respective and prospective, which

include elements of accountability and enhancement. Respective QA is accountability focused

associated with checklists and what has been done to meet external standards reflecting a

managerial approach. The prospective focus is more aligned with efforts on improvement and

looking to the future which reflects the study's description of enhancement. Moreover, Singh

(2010) argued that traditional QA is associated with consumer protections and accountability

which aligns with Biggs' (2001) argument that QA is more of a managerial task than an

academic task. I found this to be relevant because this reflects the public accountability elements

that are often associated with the US context of accreditation especially for those agencies

recognized by the USDE and/or CHEA. As for enhancement, Harvey (2004-23) described QE as

a process related to improvement or augmentation- specifically in the areas of student learning or

institutional or program of study quality. Furthermore, in presenting the concepts of QA and QE

to participants, I noted a continuum in which QA (accountability) was on one end and QE

(improvement) on the other. This continuum was based on Elassy's (2015) argument that QA

and QE processes are on a quality continuum. Elassy (2015) argued that QA is a diagnostic

process aimed at assessing quality to determine strengths and limitations, and QE is a process

focused on improving quality or a curative process for the limitations found during the QA

processes.

The use of a continuum is important since it means that agencies are able to move along

the continuum and do not have to view QA and QE as opposing concepts. With this in mind,

respondents were asked about their focus in the context of a continuum. Though a majority of

agencies noted that their agency was more focused on QE, it is highly likely based the interviews

and the expectations set by external recognition bodies such as the USDE and CHEA that QA

functions are also are part of the agency's activities. As Elassy (2015) noted, QA and QE are not

separate functions due to their interconnectedness. In particular, many of the QA functions expected of accrediting agencies are those more managerial expectations. For agencies recognized by the USDE, many of the expectations for their oversight are aligned with managerial and audit functions given their roles as gatekeepers for access to government funding. Furthermore, as noted by Kelchen (2017), the USDE's monitoring of accreditation agencies is usually focused on technical compliance by agencies with federal requirements. This is consistent with historical functions of QA agencies noted by Biggs (2001) and Singh (2010) who described the managerial/ oversight function as one of the key characteristics of QAA agencies. Moreover, accrediting agencies have been criticized frequently for focusing more on managerial oversight of issues like the financial indicators/health of institutions rather than performance improvement and/or student learning which is consistent with others noting the accountability function of quality assurance agencies (Kelchen, 2017). Due to this criticism, it is no surprise that agencies have begun to shift their focus more toward quality enhancement which has been suggested by Kelchen (2017) as a potential area for improvement for the US accreditation system. Furthermore, Elassy (2015) argued that the QE function has become a greater focus over the past 20 years, which aligns with this study's research results.

Although the study did not delve deeply into participants specific understanding of definitions of QA and QE, the data showed that there is a relationship between the concepts that is not necessarily separate and distinct. For example, during interviews, the concepts were often discussed together with QA seen as more associated with accountability and meeting standards and QE as a part of the role in making improvements. Specifically related to the role of social justice in quality assessments, an agency's focus or leaning toward QA or QE does influence how SJ is incorporated based on the data results. The data indicated the QE focus for agencies provides slightly more opportunities to incorporate SJ into their activities than a QA focus. For example, Participants 5's comments highlighted the greater flexibility of QE efforts with reference to standards as well as the actual dialog with institutions. "Quality improvement provides little more of an open opportunity until the standards change. It doesn't matter what happens on the quality assurance side… The hardest thing to do is change standards…More specifically, "… quality improvement is a more fluid or porous concept and because the quality improvement interaction with the [site visit] team [about standards and expectations] …. [I]it

allows for raising a number of issues that you might not raise over here on the harder edge/accountability side- that is what quality assurance is…" (P5).

The differences in flexibility between QA and QE highlighted in the study were also highlighted by Filippakou and Tapper (2008), who noted that QA is a process related to judgement of quality based on standards or criteria; however, QE was focused on enhancement or improvement which is a less bounded process allowing for more opportunities for dialog and interpretation. Although this study was not aimed at the exploration of the shift from QA to QE by some agencies, the greater focus on quality enhancement may be a way for agencies to focus on less traditional measures of quality related to metrics and accountability functions. This might allow accrediting agencies to expand their ideas of quality to include more social justice elements into their expectations.

Challenges Related to Quality Assurance and Social Justice

As evidenced by the preceding sections, agencies are incorporating SJ into their expectations and activities; however, these activities are not without challenges. The development, implementation, and interpretation/evaluation of accreditation standards; and the US legal, political, and regulatory environment present obstacles when looking to incorporate social justice into their oversight practices.

Challenge: Developing, Implementing, and Evaluating Accreditation Standards

The development of standards is one of the most common ways in which agencies are incorporating social justice expectations in to their process; however, agencies are challenged when it comes to developing standards to incorporate social justice elements. One participant noted that "We're looking at this area and we are really struggling to find information… on this regarding the ability to write criteria so that it's in a meaningful and measurable way that programs can evidence" (P12). Also, the data highlighted that the context in which agencies operate affects how the standards are not only structured, but also applied to institutions and programs. For example, a participant commented: "one of the challenges for my own context… is in the structure and interpretation of the standards themselves; there are conflicting assumptions" (P16). Additionally, responses reflected the implementation and evaluation challenge as noted by one participant: "How are we going to apply this type of new criterion to a program… Specifically, the board struggles with probably the most those really gray areas,

[about] how well is an institution addressing issues." (P3). This challenge is important, because the volunteer board members develop and apply standards especially in areas that are more subjective or where there are no clear-cut measures or interpretations. As previously noted, this is significant because accreditation decisions are influenced by various individual interpretations of the SPPs; value judgements (Levrio, 1989), and underlying assumptions.

Another challenge with the standards process, although not explicitly highlighted in the findings, is the timing or extensive process that some agencies undergo to change standards. In many cases, making substantive changes or revisions to standards is a deliberative process that is time consuming and requires extensive resources and stakeholder input to ensure that standards are current relevant and accepted by the public. As noted by Greenfield et al. (2014), in reference to medical accreditation standards, "the revision of accreditation standards requires considerable resources and expertise, drawn from a broad range of stakeholders. Collaborative, inclusive processes that engage key stakeholders helps promote greater industry acceptance of the standards" (p.5). Greenfield et al.'s (2014) description of the process holds true for agencies recognized by the USDE and CHEA, as these agencies are expected to engage in standards revision processes that reflect deliberateness, collaboration, and inclusivity from stakeholders.

Overall, the revision of standards is not a quick process, even though agencies may be asked to respond quickly to issues. The data suggest that changes can be made to standards quickly if needed. In particular, when asked if they addressed institutional racism issues as result of the social unrest in 2020, more than half (56%) of survey respondents noted their agencies responded to the call for action; and of this group15% indicated that changes were made to standards. Although only 15% responded with standards changes, others responded they created public statements, developed internal or external volunteer groups to begin investigating how to address the issue. While some agencies responded with standards changes, it seems likely that more substantive changes along with implementation by these agencies and others will take more time and that "other activities" are easier to engage in than the development and implementation of standards. As noted previously, the revision of accreditation standards, policies, and procedures are an extensive and time-consuming process, as noted by Greenfield et al. (2014). This immediate response with "other activities" seems more likely than longer-term approaches requiring review and implementation of standards. Given the time needed to make changes, it is not surprising that more agencies did not indicate changes to standards.

Challenge: Operating within a Legalistic and Regulatory Framework (Political environment)

As noted, the development, implementation, and evaluation of standards poses
challenges; however, another challenge is the legal and regulatory environment in which US
agencies operate. This framework influences all aspects of organizational operations including
SPPs, expectations, and organizational behavior. Responses revealed there is some reluctance or
apprehension by agencies to be more socially conscious with their expectations when it comes to
moving beyond expectations for quantifiable outcome measures (e.g., graduation rates,
professional pass rates, etc.). The apprehension to move beyond traditional quantifiable
measures aligns with the findings highlighted in the 2017 US government report on the US
accreditation system. Emrey-Arras (2017) found that accreditors are challenged with how to
effectively define and measure quality especially in fields where quantifiable measures do not
exist.

Often, accreditors are concerned about criticism and whether their assessments and
decisions are defensible in court. The dual role that USDE recognized accreditors play as
gatekeeper and overseers of quality, which creates tension between accreditors and institutions
when the accreditors identify issues or make adverse decisions that could jeopardize an
institution's access to federal funding (Emrey-Arras, 2017). For example, one participant noted
"My concern is once we start moving into the accountability side of it [social justice] … we open
ourselves up to a fair amount of criticism and frankly legal action" (P3). And another shared that
"accreditation is a good target for people that want to make a point in a lawsuit" (P4). This is a
real challenge given that a number of accreditors who have been sued as noted by Kelchen
(2017). Thus, agencies find themselves "in a bind" due to political pressures from lawmakers;
expectations from the federal government to carry out accountability responsibilities; and risk of
institutions and programs wanting to take legal action if accreditors' make decisions potentially
resulting negative implications including but not limited to the loss of access to federal funding.

Many agencies operate within the USDE or CHEA frameworks. The USDE recognition
process heavily influences the public accountability function in which many accreditors operate.
As a result, agencies wanting to adhere and comply with the guidelines to obtain and maintain
recognition may not fully feel comfortable or understand how to integrate social justice
dimensions given the accountability and oversight responsibilities expected on them by the
federal government. For example, the data showed that agencies are willing to do more regarding

the integration of social justice into their standards; however, some may be reluctant to because this may take some creativity or working in unfamiliar ways which may not be seen as meeting the USDE's expectations for how compliance should be monitored. Others may be hesitant because of fear of getting in trouble with the USDE, which could potentially impact their recognition status.

One participant's comments illustrated the dilemma faced by accreditors: "How far could you reach as an agency with standards? You know… I don't see anybody really wanting to push too hard. Everyone kind of likes to stay in their lane and rightfully so at some level because those that have experimented have kind of had their hands slapped by … the department [US Department of Education]" (P2). In reference to agencies challenges to integrate social justice, another participant noted, "This type of change in educational programs certainly takes more latitude than the USDE provides for us in monitoring programs for compliance" (P12). The participant pointed out that the current regulatory framework may need to be expanded to provide accreditors more flexibility to monitor programs than is currently provided. This is not all that surprising given historical examples of accrediting agencies getting into politically charged and uncomfortable positions with the USDE related to social justice as illustrated by NCATE's removal of the term social justice as a result of contentious 2006 appearance before the USDE's NACIQI, which makes recommendations regarding the agencies recognition to the USDE (Heybach, 2009). Accreditors are careful and conscious of the interplay between the political and regulatory environment in which they operate (Johnson & Johnson, 2007; Heybach, 2009).

Overall, some agencies seemed cautious about moving away from the more traditional accountability functions which may be more objective and defensible whereas some elements related to social justice are less about recognized accountability measures and thus open accreditors up to public criticism and legal action. This poses a substantial challenge for accreditors' willingness to integrate more subjective expectations (e.g., social justice into their work) versus more traditional quantifiable measures of quality (e.g., pass rates). However, it is important to note that CHEA recognition, may not pose as much of a challenge for accrediting agencies that opt to incorporate more social justice elements into their oversight as evidenced by CHEA's recent 2021 recognition standards. Its standards for agencies now include a requirement that they show a commitment to DEI as an organization (CHEA, 2021). CHEA's recognition

standards to recognize DEI, may provide more opportunities for agencies to expand their social justice efforts; however, USDE recognition most likely will continue to be a powerful influence on how agencies operate, given their oversight and gatekeeping roles (Henard, 2016).

Lessons Learned

The South Africa Story. Although challenges exist, the findings showed that agencies are incorporating social justice into their activities. To gain a better sense of what other QA communities have done to overcome challenges, I sought to learn from the South African QA community to provide insight to help US agencies in their work. As previously noted, the study was not a comparative study of QA systems but a means to leverage the expertise and learnings of professionals that have been operating within a QA system that intentionally aligned social justice priorities into the quality assurance framework. Social justice attention was a part of the foundational objectives of the reorganization of the higher education system in SA after apartheid ended. SA intentionally aligned social justice priorities as it redesigned its higher education and quality assurance systems after the fall of apartheid (Naidoo et al, 2007; Mzangwa, 2019). The redevelopment was linked to initiatives and a HE agenda that promoted social justice and economic development outcomes. Specifically, the intent of the redesign was aimed at creating a HE landscape that would help comprehensively address the historical legacy of exclusion and inequality and address socioeconomic needs resulting from globalization (Naidoo et al, 2007).

Lesson 1: Intentionality and Aligned Sense of Purpose

It was determined that having consensus or at least a common reference point for what is meant by social justice and clear priorities provided an opportunity for clarity and alignment among the SA HE community. As noted in interviews and referenced in the South Africa's Department of Education 1997 White Paper, social justice efforts and priorities were clearly articulated as part of the HE agenda and members of the HE community were called upon to help execute the agenda. Also, it was very important for priority issues to be identified in a common way so that efforts were aligned. Within the SA context one of the main priorities was specific to redress and redistributive policies aimed at creating equity and remedying the unfair conditions created by the apartheid system. As such, the findings reflected a common talking point when discussing issues that seemed to translate into the activities identified by agencies. Not that the

work is without challenges; it was acknowledged that having the national agenda did provide some guidance, though the agencies continue to grapple with how to specifically address the historical legacies of discrimination and exclusion. As such, the current agenda allows for more organization and as outlined in the 1997 White Paper serves as a reminder to keep the HE community focused so that efforts are not ineffective or dispersed. Responses from participants revealed that intentionality and an aligned sense of purpose among the HE and the QA systems via a national agenda provided direction on what issues were to be addressed. As such, the agenda was driven from a political and strategic level which may contribute to a more aligned implementation at agency or operational levels.

Additionally, the data highlighted that context is important for identifying problems/priorities. This is reflective of Fraser's (2009) recognition dimension for social justice. Recognition or acknowledgement of the historical claims of marginalized groups was a key part of the development and prioritization of efforts. In SA, racial inequality was identified as a priority issue and communicated as a primary social justice issues. One participant noted, "we problematize it and we keep it in the consciousness. You must not make it easy… for these things to be glossed over that's … is at the heart of the political project of social justice" (P9). In other words, by identifying and outlining what problems or specific social justice issues exist, it allows for these issues to not be ignored even if this is a difficult task. Keeping these issues in the spotlight and/or as part of the dialog, it provides an opportunity for continuous work to resolve these issues.

Lesson 2: Importance of Student Success and Language

In addition to having a common reference point and priorities, the research data also highlighted student success and support as important elements for addressing issues of redress in the SA context. As noted by one participant, student success is an element that needs more focus in SA since access has been the long focus. Participant 9 commented that "we [quality assurance community] have become more sophisticated in our thinking about them [social justice, equity, and access], and also added to them… There's no point to access without success… the problem is a revolving door syndrome. So, you have access but it's not accompanied by success, so more effort has been put into supporting students and enabling their success in institutions" (P9). For example, the participant noted that equity via access was a major focal point particularly for getting black students into higher education institutions. As noted in the 1997 White Paper,

equity within the context of HE meant providing fair opportunities to South Africans to enter HE and to be successful in the programs they entered (South Africa, 1997). P9 indicated that the focus of the social justice efforts has leaned more on access than ensuring student success. This aligns with what is needed in regard to the revision of the HE system noted by Scott (2018), who argued that there was lack of commitment to student success in the transformation agenda.

Furthermore, a key area of concern was language in the context of student support and success. For example, Participant 9 commented on what reviewing an institution through the lens of student success looks like. "We look at what the institution is doing to ensure success… how institutions are alienating spaces, especially for black African students. We're looking at what the other barriers are in terms of the language barrier because most African students and blacks in particular because they study through a medium of instruction which is a second or third language for them. Then we look at what are the supports structures for them" (P9). In terms of student success, QA examines what institutions are doing to provide the supports necessary for students to be successful. In the case of SA universities and Black and African students, language is a key barrier to success according to participants. Consequently, language was highlighted as an ongoing social justice issue that impacts equity and the goals of the transformation agenda. As noted by Participant 12, gaps in implementation of the social justice framework in the HE still exist as it relates to language. Participant 12 noted that there are still universities within SA that offer their programs in Afrikaans, and that is a kind of exclusion by its very nature… so we still have pockets… it is not something that is publicized" (P12). This was echoed in comments by Participant 10 who noted that when asked about ongoing social justice issues involving equity and redress that "I feel like the issue of language…It's something that even if when we talk social justice issues when [we] haven't even addressed it [language]" (P10). Language is a social justice issue impacting the agenda; however, it is not something that has been addressed adequately.

Participants concerns about language are reflected in past findings by Mwaniki (2012) who found that language, a key component of social justice in SA HE, is a challenge. Language allows for access for some and curtails access for others and as such efforts to update the reformation agenda should include dedicated focus to language (Mwaniki, 2012). Furthermore, Mzangwa (2019) argued that one of the gaps in the SA reformation HE agenda also included lack of attention to language. Mzangwa (2019) argued that reformation policies have led to some

material benefits for historically disadvantage Blacks in terms of access, equity, and
participation; however, social justice goals could be further advanced through more equal and
standardized university curricula and the introduction of a common language of instruction for
university.

Recommendations and "How-to" Guidelines

Based on the findings about what agencies are doing and the lessons learned from the SA
QA community, through the study I also wanted to provide information on more can be done for
and by QAA agencies to facilitate social justice action in the institutions and programs they
accredit. The following section includes recommendations based on the study as well as a
description of a "how-to" guidelines intended to aid agencies in practice.

Recommendations

- **Understand Social Justice and Set Priorities.** Agencies should come to understanding
  of social justice within the context of the organizational mission, values, and tenets of the
  interested parties and/or professions. Understandings and priorities should be agreed
  upon and vetted through the approach agency processes.

- **Leverage Best Practices.** Agencies should engage in more intentional dialog amongst
  themselves regarding social justice issues and approaches. When asked about what more
  could be done by agencies, sharing of best practices was the top activity selected by
  respondents. There may be opportunities to align efforts and priorities since many
  institutions are attempting to satisfy competing expectations from accreditors especially if
  they are overseen by multiple regulatory agencies.

- **Expand representation of students and/or members from marginalized group more
  intentionally into the accreditation process.** Agencies should leverage ways to have
  more student involvement and/or involvement from underrepresented groups in the
  process specifically on the accreditor side. As noted earlier, representation seems to be an
  area in which agencies may need to improve their efforts.

  - Agencies may wish to add more diverse and inclusive representatives as public
    members to their decision-making bodies or boards which may include student
    representatives and/or individuals from marginalized groups to whom social

justice efforts are directed or intended. They should consider representation that aligns with Fraser's dimension.

- o Solicit feedback from interested parties in more meaningful ways. Agencies should develop ways to solicit deeper and broader stakeholder feedback regarding issues within the field or public as well as encouraging more active participation in the accreditation decision-making processes. This may also be done through the use of communities of practice, focus groups, and other mechanisms aimed at providing platforms to share with the accreditors.

- o Increase participation of underrepresented and marginalized groups served by accrediting agencies in the accreditation decision-making process. Agencies should actively look for opportunities to increase representation on its decision-making boards, peer reviewer teams, agency staff, appeals boards, etc. This should not only involve representation at the institutional level but especially at the accreditor level where decisions about quality are being made.

Social Justice "How-to" Guidelines for Practice

In embarking on this research project from the beginning, I knew that I wanted to contribute directly to the practice of HE QAA. I wanted my research to not only be relevant, but also be a tangible body of work that I and others could use in the field. Thus, one of my goals for the research was to walk away with information so that I could begin developing the foundational elements for how accrediting agencies could actually facilitate social justice in their work. However, prior to developing these guidelines, it was important for me to have some fundamental questions addressed which are reflected in my research questions. Based on the study including the extensive literature review, data collection, analysis and discussion, I was able to develop the following "how-to" guidelines.

The next section will discuss the purpose, rationale behind and proposed implementation of this these guidelines. Please note that these guidelines are experimental and intended to be a starting point for further research and development, since the nature of quality in higher education and social justice issues are constantly evolving. The guidelines (Figure 5.2) are an attempt to answer the questions from agencies and other interested parties regarding where they can start and how to build upon existing efforts. The guidelines are grounded in the intention that accreditors may use and expand on the guidelines to help them incorporate more SJ into their

practices. These guidelines are not intended to be comprehensive but a starting point for dialog and hopefully a guide for practitioners. Please note that the colors of the diagram have no significance. The following are separate elements and are not intended to go in any order; however, there may be some steps that naturally flow:

Figure 5. 1 Social Justice Guidelines for Quality Assurance and Accreditation Organizations
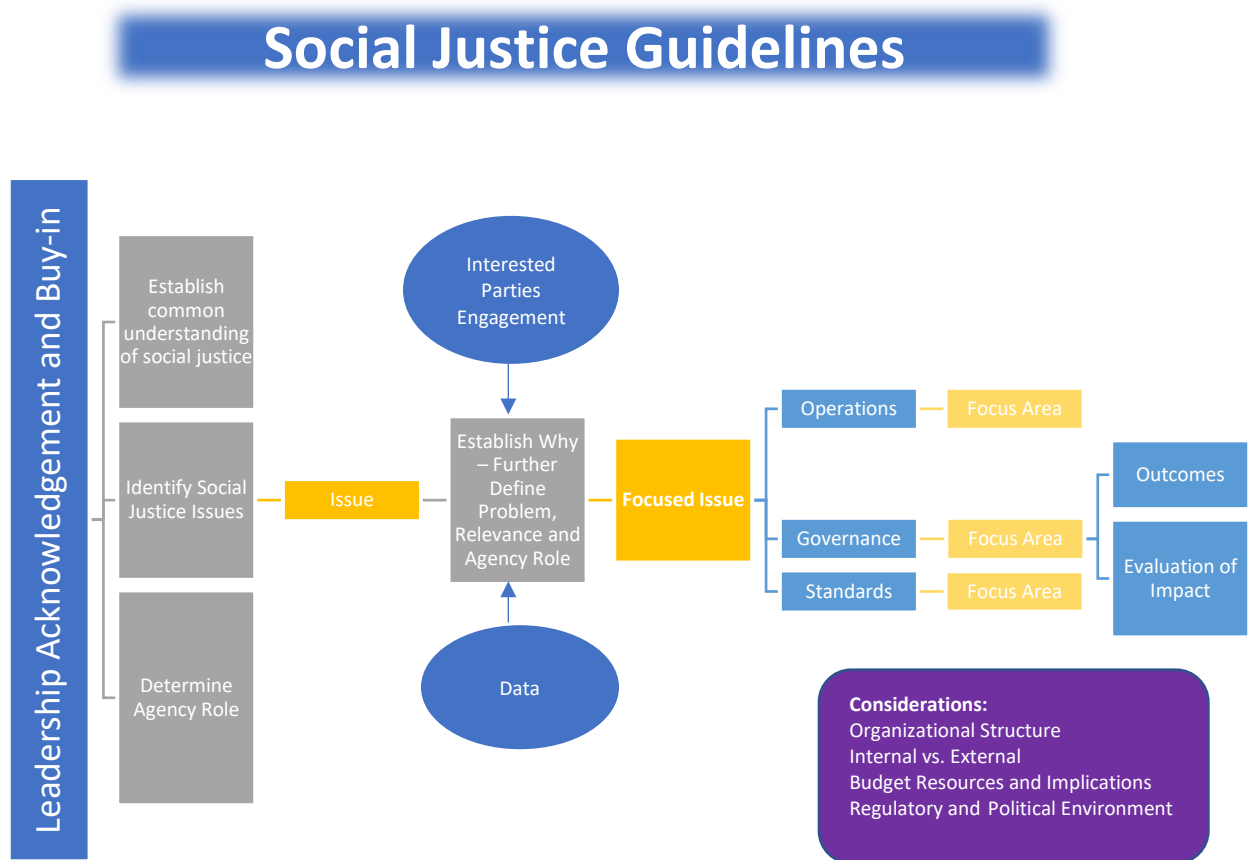
Leadership Acknowledgement and Buy-in.

As noted in the findings, leadership matters within an organization for advancing social justice efforts. For agencies attempting to be more inclusive of SJ, it is important for leadership to be aligned with the efforts and goals. Thus, leadership must buy-in or accept the ideas for the initiatives or efforts to move forward.

Establish Common Understanding of Social Justice or Common Reference Point.

The findings suggested that most agencies do not have a reference point for social justice. It is important for agencies to establish a common understanding so that all stakeholders involved are aligned at all stages of the process. It is critical to understand the "what." Though a

definition is not critical as understood from Fraser and other critical theorists, it is important as noted in the findings, so that agencies and their stakeholders have direction and alignment within their contexts.

Determine the Role of the Agency.

Determining the agencies role as it relates to social justice and/or particular issues is important. This allows the agency to set an agenda as well as establish boundaries for what should be within the scope of the agency. This is a key element when determining what issues to focus and accordingly developing strategies to address issues.

Identify Social Justice Issues- What will be the exact issue that agency will focus.

- **Establish Why – Further Define Problem, Relevance and Agency Role**
    - Data points. Data should be used to identify issues. Data can be gathered in a number of ways. As shown in the survey findings, respondents advocate more use of data to better understand student populations. Likewise, accreditors should use data to help problematize (or acknowledge) issues as well as prioritize and chart strategies for addressing issues.
        1. Literature and research in the field
        2. Institutional and programmatic data collected and analyzed
    - Interested parties' feedback
        - Calls for Comment
        - Focus Groups
- **Identify an Issue for Focus**. This provides the "why" and "so what" for stakeholders internally and externally (if applicable). Once an issue is identified, the agency should determine how it will address the issue by looking at the agency from three perspectives:
        - Operations (Staff, Volunteers)
        - Governance (Leadership)
        - Standards
    - In determining the different perspectives to address, an agency may want to explore a focus point within all or one area of the organization. Once a focus point is established and a strategy developed, agencies should determine outcomes for the strategies as well as how to monitor developments and evaluate the impact of

their efforts. Evaluation should be continuous and revisions to the strategies should be incorporated as appropriate.

An important aspect of incorporating social justice activities is an agency's consideration of organizational structure; whether the agency is attempting to address issues internal to the organization or external to their stakeholders; budget resources and implications; and the political and regulatory environment. These considerations are important as they contribute to the context for which the agency is operating. These considerations and perhaps others should be given attention at all phases of the planning process (See Figure 5.1).

In addition to the Figure 5.1, Figure 5.2 represents the social justice "how to" guidelines in relationship with Fraser's (2009) Social Justice Framework as explained in chapter 2 and depicted in Figure 2.2. It is recommended that agencies consider viewing the initiation, development, and implementation of activities through Fraser's (2007 & 2009) social justice lens (Recognition, Representation, and Redistribution) as discussed in this study. Additionally, Figure 5.2 shows my adaptation of the Fraser's framework to accommodate the how-to guidelines. The overall framework includes "context" as an additional dimension that agencies should consider when using the framework guidelines as this research highlighted that context matters as an important element of social justice in quality issues. Agencies use of the "how-to" guidelines should be influenced by elements highlighted in Figure 5.2.

Figure 5.2 QAA Social Justice Guidelines using Fraser's Three Dimensions of Social Justice

The aforementioned "how to" guidelines were reviewed with focus group participants. The groups agreed that this type of practical guide would help agencies looking for a place to start conversations. The expectation would be for agencies to adapt the guidelines to meet their needs and context. It was recommended that the guidelines be used separately for matters related to internal operations to agencies and external expectations for the units they accredit. Additionally, participants recommended that a set of complementary questions be built out to accompany the guidelines to help individuals facilitate the process within their organizations. As noted earlier, the guidance presented here represents a template for practice and a starting point for agencies. It is intended to stimulate dialog and assist agencies in a deliberative process to facilitate more attention to social justice into their quality oversight activities.

Summary

Agencies are engaging in various activities to incorporate social justice into their oversight and assessment activities; however, the degree to which they do these activities varies. Based on the research findings, accreditation SPPs are one of the key activities in which agencies reflect attention to social justice. In terms of Fraser's framework on social justice, the research findings showed that agencies are engaging are integrating social justice efforts aligned closely with two dimensions with representation being less obvious. Additionally, it is not clear if agencies are engaging in activities that reflect all three dimensions in a comprehensive or intentional manner, but this should be advocated for since the dimensions reinforce each other as a solid framework for how to achieve social justice outcomes. In some the lesser focus on representation by agencies is not surprising, since debates regarding social justice have traditionally focused on redistribution (economic distribution) and cultural recognition. However, these elements are not enough (nor have the capacity) to address the complexity of issues posed in today's society and hence Fraser (2005) argued for more focus on representation as key element to addressing social justice. As such, each element reinforces the other which should produce a more comprehensive approach in the activities conducted by agencies.

In terms of activities, QE as a focus lends itself to being slightly more conducive to incorporating social justice activities. Although social justice is being considered by agencies, it does not come without challenges including a cautiousness of many agencies to boldly explore more subjective expectations related to social justice due to the legalistic and regulatory

framework of the US. This chapter concludes with lessons learned for agencies and an overview an "how-to" guidance on how agencies can begin or continue their efforts to include social justice elements into their oversight. This guidance was developed based on learnings drawn from the findings as well as influenced by Fraser's (2009) approach to social justice. The overall guidance was combined with Fraser's three-dimensional approach to include a fourth element, "context", due the role it plays in social justice and quality. Most importantly, the guidance is intended as a starting point for agencies to be intentional in their efforts and should be centered around the normative approach provided by Fraser. The following chapter will provide my concluding thoughts on the study including potential areas for future research, limitations of the study, and my overall reflections regarding the research process and the study.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Higher education has always served a vital role in contributing to society and has been called upon on numerous occasions to help to address social justice efforts. As noted in this study, quality assurance frameworks are extremely influential in shaping HE's priorities. As such, this study investigated how QA, specifically accrediting agencies in the US, are incorporating social justice activities into their quality expectations and assessments in the hope that this social justice focus facilitates institutions attention to issues. The following sections include a brief discussion of achievement of the study aims, the limitations of the study, areas for future research, and conclude with my final reflections on the research process and what I have learned during this research journey.

Achievement of the Study Aims and Objectives

The overarching aim of this research was to investigate ways in which accrediting agencies facilitate attention to social justice issues and outcomes for the institutions or programs they accredit and provide recommendations and/or support the development of guidelines to help accrediting agencies do more to incorporate social justice into their oversight functions. While I recognize there were limitations this study, I believe that I have largely achieved the study aim by answering the study's research questions. I presented a number of findings along with recommendations and "how-to" guidance informed primarily by the findings from the US community as well as some lessons learned from the SA QAA community. Key findings suggest that accreditors have an awareness of the role that social justice has to play in making quality assurance grounded in issues related to equity and thus leveling the playing field for historically marginalized groups. Some agencies are incorporating social justice into their expectations, primarily through the use of accreditation SPPs and specifically QE activities allow more flexibility and latitude for incorporating social justice dimensions. Major challenges for agencies include the development, implementation, and interpretation/evaluation of standards and the legalistic and regulatory environment in which accreditors in the US operate. The USDE's overarching expectations of accountability and compliance may leave many accreditors hesitant to move too far in directions that require more flexibility, since they are charged with gatekeeper responsibilities. Overall, the findings indicated that agencies are aware of social justice concerns and are actively, albeit at different engagement levels, encouraging attention to social justice

efforts for the institutions and/or programs they accredit. Primarily, this encouragement may be done through the promotion of diversity, equity, inclusion, and student success in their accreditation SPPS or internal policies and procedures for how they manage their internal operations including the recruitment, training, and management of volunteers and staff.

Furthermore, using Fraser's three-dimensional approach as a lens, agencies are engaging are integrating social justice efforts aligned closely with redistribution and recognition dimensions of her approach and less with the representation dimension. Fraser (2009) argued that it is important for all dimensions to be used in this approach to social justice as each dimension reinforces the other. However, the reliance on the redistribution and recognition approaches to social justice is understandable given that these elements normally dominate social justice discussions. In fact, Fraser's (2009) original approach to social justice did not include the last element of representation. Based on the study and Fraser's (2009) approach, agencies are missing an opportunity to engage in a more comprehensive approach in their efforts, but the study has provided examples of more things that could be done as well as guidelines for practice. Additionally, it should be noted that agencies should seek to pay more attention to all three dimensions of Fraser's approach since it provides a solid framework for being mindful about how to integrate social justice into the existing QAA systems.

Significance of the Research

Given the expanded expectations and demands of HE coupled with the complex societal issues, the need for social justice outcomes will most likely continue to be at the top of HE agendas. As powerful influencers in the HE community, accreditors have and will continue to be called on similar to their HE counterparts to contribute to better social justice outcomes. As such, this study is important, because it helped to establish a baseline for what accreditors are currently doing, provides challenges to the work as well as recommendations and discussion about how to build upon existing practices. There is limited literature providing recommendations on what and how agencies might go about incorporating social justice notions into their expectations and practice. In terms of scholarship, the study adds to the literature on the use of Nancy Fraser's social justice framework to examine issues in higher education and specifically to consider how her framework could be used within the QA of HE and specifically how the integration of social justice can be discussed within the context of existing QAA

structures. In regard to practice, the study provides an important addition to the limited body of knowledge about what agencies are actually doing to promote social justice. This study and results will help to expand and perhaps lead to more intentional and impactful conversations regarding quality assurance and accreditation community's role in helping to address social issues. Now more than ever, as issues related to race and other injustices continue to plague society, it is paramount for HE and QAA agencies to be more active in the fight for social justice.

Limitations of the Study

The study revealed a number of highlights for how QAA agencies are integrating social justice into their practices; however, the study has potential limitations. As with any study there are weaknesses within that may influence outcomes and conclusions of the research. Study limitations should be presented in studies, because they are an important part of the scholarly process and provide meaningful information to readers to help them provide context to determine the credibility of the study as well as generalize the study's findings in an appropriate manner (Price & Murnan, 2004). As such, the following were possible limitations of the study:

Survey Response Rate

As noted in chapter 3, an email survey was fielded as part of the data collection process to 300 members of the US QAA community including staff and volunteers; however, the response rate for the survey was around 16%. The email survey provided an easy and efficient way to gather information about the larger US QAA community; and I had hoped that it would allow me to generalize more about the population. Unfortunately, due to the low response rate, that is not possible; however, there were some interesting insights that came out of the survey as noted in chapters 4 and 5. As noted by Sivo et al (2006), low response rates are one of the most challenging factors when using online surveys. According to Fan and Yan (2010), the response rate for online surveys is about 11% lower than other survey options, which has been a concern for social science researchers and served as a limitation for this study.

Survey Instrument – Questions

Although, I was pleased with the survey and it was validated prior to its fielding, some of the survey questions did not flow as well as they were originally planned. This led to the survey

being not as fluid in some areas particularly the inclusion of the QA continuum question. Though this information was important to obtain, this may have been asked in a different manner or perhaps this data could have solely collected during the qualitative methods.

Timing of Data Collection

The data collection for the study took place at the onset of a global pandemic which had an impact on data collection methods. Interviews were conducted beginning in December 2019 and were concluded in Spring 2020. All interviews after in 2020 were conducted via Zoom, a video-conferencing tool, though the original plan was to conduct some interviews in-person. The survey was fielded during the summer of 2020. Given the pandemic which caused massive disruptions in business operations, there is a possibility that more people may have responded if not in under such circumstances. Additionally, the focus groups conducted in fall 2020 were initially planned to be in-person but were conducted virtually via Zoom due to the pandemic. Although the virtual format allowed for a bit more flexibility in scheduling and provided cost savings; it did not allow for face-to-face interaction among participants nor allow me to fully observe body language which may have provided data and important information.

Future Areas of Research

This research highlighted a number of gaps in the knowledge around how agencies are incorporating social justice into their practices especially as high levels of attention are being given to social justice in the US QAA community partly due to trends in higher education and demands for action after the events of 2020 in US society. As such, there are areas that warrant further exploration to build upon this study's findings. The following questions may be considerations for future research:

- How has attention to social justice in accreditation SPPs impacted the program and/or institutional outcomes?
- How are agencies using the information gathered from programs and institutions to make quality assurance and accreditation decisions?
- How does the intersection of professional competencies and accreditation standards allow for the infusion of social justice expectations?
- What impact has accreditors focus on DEI had on institutional social justice outcomes?

- How are agencies defining student success and what impact are student success expectations have on institutional social justice outcomes?

- How do agencies data reporting requirements reflect attention to social justice issues, and how are programs and/or institutions addressing those social justice issues?

- How specifically do agencies quality enhancement expectations support the institutional social justice efforts?

- How are agencies using institutional responses to social justice expectations as factor into how quality is assessed and decisions are made regarding compliance? (e.g., how do agencies determine if institutions found to be meeting diversity or equity standards-through subjective or objective measures)

- How agencies used the "how to" and how it impacted practices, decision-making and oversight and what might be needed to expand the guidance for agencies ?

- How does make-up and composition of accreditation staff and/or volunteer decision-making bodies represent or reflect wider population and the impact on accrediting agencies operations and expectations for higher education institutions?

- How do the underlying assumptions of people who decide the standards influence the standards being developed?

- What are the results and impact of implementation of the study's "how-to" guidance or suggestions within an accrediting agency?

Reflections and Conclusion

Admittedly, I approached the thesis stage with mixed emotion. On the one hand, I was very excited and relieved to be at this stage of my journey and on the other hand, I was anxious about my ability as a novice researcher to fully engage in the research process. Despite being excited about my topic and feeling confident in my ability to design and execute a study, I was concerned about how everything was going to come together and this overwhelming feeling that "I hope I do this right". I began this study with the idea that my topic and the curiosity to look into social justice and accreditation as new a concept for members of the US accreditation community would be useful. I knew that there would be some interest in my topic given the traditional role of HE and its purposes around the public good. However, I did not imagine by the end of this research study that the momentum and level of interest from the accreditation

community would be so strong. My aims were to explore what was being done by accrediting agencies and make a meaningful contribution to support their continuing efforts which I feel that I have accomplished.

During this thesis process, I saw many shifts and changes within myself and the project itself. I began with nervousness, hesitation, and uncertainty. Initially, I began journaling and making field notes and recall having ongoing conversations with my supervisor about whether I was doing things "right". My supervisor's response would often be that "there is no right or wrong answer and you have to trust yourself as the researcher". The process unfolded as described; however, it did take more trust than I was initially willing to give to the process. Throughout the process, I was faced with a number of challenges. Due to the global pandemic, job and life demands, loss of close family members, and personnel changes with my academic supervisors caused me to have serious lulls in momentum and quite frankly my motivation to continue; however, my support network and supervisors provided countless words of encouragements.

In reflecting on what I found and what it means to the HE and QAA community, my initial thoughts were that my research topic might be met with mixed feelings from members of the US QAA community, since my prior professional experiences had shown me that agencies were deeply influenced by their public accountability responsibilities. In going through the process, I felt like I was watching a wave beginning to take form (based on some of the conversations around more attention to DEI in HE) and quickly leading to what now seems like the crest of the wave as it relates to social justice and accreditors' roles in helping to advance social justice objectives in HE. For example, at the beginning of the study in winter of 2019, the data I collected through in my initial interviews allowed me to get a sense of the different ways in which people understood social justice and its role in quality assurance in more abstract or theoretical terms. However, as the study progressed into 2020 coinciding with the beginning of the COVID pandemic and several cases of injustices in the US going viral in the media, the interviews revealed a more focused attention or at least an acknowledgement that social justice should by aligned with quality assurance. In large part this was reflective of the larger society's overwhelming attention to social justice as evidenced by civil, business, and government sectors heightened attention on institutional racism in 2020. The US accreditation community in particular was abuzz with how to address issues of discrimination and institutional racism. The

wave is evidenced through DEI as common talking points for many agencies within the US. It is also reflected in CHEA's most recognition standards for accrediting agencies which now ask agencies to demonstrate how they are promoting DEI efforts for the programs and/or institutions they accredited. Furthermore, during my research, I was called upon to speak at a professional accreditation conference about my preliminary findings because people were interested in how to do more and were eager to hear about the findings of my study. Additionally, in my professional capacity, I led organizational efforts to be more responsive to social justice issues for the accrediting agency where I was employed, so I was able to experiment with portions of the "how-to" guidelines. Moreover, I participated in several communities of practice in accreditation with other US accreditors around how accreditation can advance and facilitate achievement of social justice objectives and respond to social problems.

Participation in these professional activities during the writing of my thesis brought added meaning to my research. I began to see my research come to life and witnessed the real-time application of my research to practice. This realization not only motivated me, but it also made more me nervous about my abilities as a researcher. I remember early in the doctoral program being introduced to the concept of "scholar-practitioner" and thought to myself that this describes me or at least what I would like to be able to accomplish- connecting research and my professional practice. Although, I did not realize that there would be so many emotional peaks and valleys on my way to becoming a researcher or scholar.

Throughout this entire doctoral journey from my coursework and especially as a result of conducting this study, the process has challenged me in ways that I expected and other ways that I never imagined. I never saw myself as a researcher or scholar, but more as an experienced professional in my field. Conducting this study and writing the thesis has helped me gain confidence in my abilities as a researcher. Early on in the thesis stage, I was telling a friend and colleague about my reservations as novice researcher and a recent bout of "imposter syndrome" related to conducting the study. She promptly gave me a pep talk by reminding me of all the research I had conducted in the past and telling me that I should be confident, because "you will know more about your subject matter than anyone else, so you are an expert". Her comments resonated deeply with me and helped to motivate me throughout the process. I have never been someone who has lacked confidence, but this thesis journey tested my confidence and more so my ability to persist. Personally, I have had a number of challenges including the loss of loved

ones during the pandemic and like everyone I was balancing the emotional stress of the pandemic as well as an enduring a demanding and unhealthy work environment. As such, valuable lessons learned for me during this process include: always prioritize my mental health; worrying is not progress; and aim for progress not perfection. I have questioned my decision to take on this task many times as I sat in front of my computer, fretting over how or what I had to do next, but completing this thesis has validated for me, yet again, that I have the ability and resilience to meet my goals. Frankly, this journey is not one that I would recommend for everyone, but I am grateful for the opportunity thus far, because I have grown both professionally and personally as a result of it.

Overall, as for the study, I hope that my research is a much-needed addition to the literature seeking to support the HE community in being more engaged with addressing societal concerns. Going back to Singh's (2011) question noted in chapter 1, "What are the possibilities for reframing quality assurance within an alternative political and policy project which includes and actively addresses social justice" (p.488)? I think there are possibilities available, but change will not happen quickly and continued dialog, research, and actions are required for change. Despite potential challenges, I am hopeful that US accreditors are moving in a direction that has US accrediting agencies thinking about how to expand their efforts beyond the accountability expectations and explore ways to be more directly connected and influential in the higher education community to achieve social justice outcomes. As such, I look forward to providing more meaningful contributions to the HE and QA communities.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Sample Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

Introduction

Background Information
I'm a student in the University of Liverpool Higher Education Doctorate program. This research being conducted fulfill thesis requirement for which I am investigating how quality assurance/accreditation frameworks aid institutions in the mitigation of social justice issues.

Title of Study and Major Research Questions
Moving Beyond Accountability Toward a More Socially Conscious Guardianship of Higher Educational Quality: An Examination of Quality Assurance/Accreditation (QAA) Frameworks and Social Justice

1.) How are US QAA agencies incorporating social justice dimensions into their expectations for programs and/or institutions to address social justice concerns?

2.) How do differences in QAA agencies' focus on assurance vs. enhancement influence how QAA agencies operationalize policies, standards and procedures for addressing social justice concerns?

3.) What lessons if any can the US higher education QAA scheme learn from the South African QAA framework regarding the incorporation of social justice elements into the oversight of institutional and programmatic quality?

4.) What more can be done by US QAA agencies to enhance responses to specific social justice concerns? What elements could be included in a framework to aid agencies in facilitating the mitigation of social justice issues?

Interview Objective:
The objective of the interview is to gather information regarding how quality assurance/accreditation agencies and the QAA community operate within the context of the research questions. Additionally, the objective is to gain insights, understandings, and perspectives from knowledgeable members of the higher education Quality assurance and accreditation.

Interview Time, Date, Place: January 31, 2020 (Zoom)
Interviewer: Kimberlee Moore
Interviewee:
Interview Instructions:

- Review Informed Consent, Participant Information Form and confidentiality measures.
- State that the interview will take approximately 45 minutes to 1 hr via Video Conference (Zoom or Skype), phone, or in-person. In-person and phone interviews will be audio recorded.
- Participants are free to discontinue participation at any time.
- Thank participant in advance for agreeing to the interview.

Background Documents for the Interview (These documents are meant to help inform my questioning.)

- Website
- Accreditation Policies and Procedures

Begin by providing definition of social justice:

Social Justice Definition:
[S]social justice is about understanding and interrogating how different individuals or groups are faring in comparison with others in a specific context (such as a university) or more broadly in society. This often involves the consideration of distributional issues, both in terms of distribution of advantages and disadvantages (Wilson-Strydom, 2015, p. 145)."

Interview Questions

- What role, if any, does the QAA community have to play in being responsive to social concerns?
- How would you describe QAA's community's relationship/connectivity to issues of SJ?
  - In a recent publication, it was noted that there is an emerging trend toward including social justice and equity issues as part of judgments about quality. What are your thoughts on what this might look like/entail?"
    - Conversations About Quality in Higher Education: What are They and Where Do We Take Them? (October, 2019)
      - As it relates to quality, "most recently, some think tanks and foundations have begun to focus on issues of social justice and equity, reflecting on financing efforts to better address diversity and opportunity for low-income, women and minority students. The focus includes some attention to sexual misconduct as well" (p.8)
- Does your agency define social justice or sj issues—i.e. equity, access, corruption, diversity, inclusion?
  - If not, is it a concept that is talked/discussed in your agency? How might your agency begin to define the concept? Why is this important to your agency?

- o If so, how? If at all, what factors have shaped your agency's attention to social justice (e.g. constituencies, politics)?

- Are there priority social justice issues that could be (or are) addressed by the QAA community and specifically, your agency? If so, how are these issues prioritized by others and/or your agency? (For example, some agencies may be focused on SJ due to its context, purpose, and audience e.g. social work).

- Could you describe ways in which your agency's policies and procedures promote being cognizant of social justice concerns such as equity, diversity, inclusion, etc? For example, accreditation standards, internal policies, board policies?
    - o How is guidance provided to programs and volunteers on social justice issues? For example, you have the strategic planning and diversity documents… How are best practice resources compiled for assisting programs, Board members, site visitors, and other volunteers? How are expectations around social justice calibrated with the volunteers? For example, how do you ensure the site visitors and Board members are on the same page regarding compliance/meeting expectation around sj standards e.g. inclusion student and faculty diversity; cultural competency, etc?

- Given the traditional focus on public accountability, are there opportunities for your agency to be more socially conscious?
    - o If you unlimited financial/human/time resources, what ways or how might your agency and/or others go about encouraging or promoting the programs that your agency accredits to address social justice concerns? (e.g., activities, standards—some agencies have standards re: public good; policies)

- On the spectrum of continuous quality enhancement (improvement) or assurance (monitoring of existing standards)—where do you find your agency on the spectrum if QE is one end and QA the other end? How do you think this focus influence how your agencies or others might operationalize policies, standards and procedures for addressing social justice concerns?

- What challenges if any has your agency encountered promoting more attention to social justice issues (list ones perhaps identified earlier)? What possible challenges might you anticipate if your agency or others want to or incorporate more SJ dimensions into oversight of programs and/institutions? What, if any, are the implications for more SJ focus in conversations/judgement of quality to include SJ about in your agency and/or the larger QAA community?

- Is there anything more you would like to add?

Closing

- Thank interviewee
- Assure confidentiality
- Ask if I can follow-up if there are additional questions
- Ask permission to follow-up, if needed
- Provide timeline for data collection and thesis write up
- Note that a copy of final thesis will be made available to participant

Appendix 2: Focus Group Agenda

QAA and Social Justice Focus Group Agenda

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this focus group. I've outlined a few items in preparation for tomorrow's session.

Participation:

Again, participation is completely voluntary, and you may discontinue participation at any time. More details about the study are contained in the participant information sheet and the participant consent form which you received with the invitation to participate.

Purpose:
The purpose of this focus group is for me to gather additional insights about specific preliminary research findings and feedback on a newly developed "how to" social justice framework to assist agencies in facilitating the mitigation of social justice issues.

Background Information:

The framework has been in development throughout the entire research process and based on insights gained from interviews, a survey, document analysis, and a literature review. Additionally, the framework is influenced by Nancy Fraser's (Carzden, 2012; Fraser, 2009) social justice framework which includes the reinforcing concepts of:

- **Recognition-** identification and acknowledgment of the claims of historically marginalized groups
- **Representation-** the rights of individuals and groups to have their voices heard in debates about social justice and injustice and to actively participate in decision making
- **Redistribution-** access to resources and the potential outcomes that arise from this

Agenda:
- Welcome
- Brief Introductions
- Presentation of Specific Results
    - Questions:
        - Why might some feel that social justice issues have no place in quality assurance?
        - Provide examples of challenges that agencies might face if they attempt to be more socially conscious?
        - What more can be done by agencies?
- Walk-Through of Framework (attached)
    - Questions:
        - How helpful or useful would this be to agencies?

- How likely would you be to use the framework?
- Is it functional and/or practical? If no, explain.
- How easy would this be to follow?
- What do you like about it?
- What do you dislike?
- How can the visual representation be improved? Is anything missing?
- What areas are unclear?

References:

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Appendix 3: Survey Tool

Quality Assurance/Accreditation and Social Justice Survey

TITLE OF STUDY

Moving Beyond Accountability Toward a More Socially Conscious Guardianship of Higher Educational Quality: An Examination of Quality Assurance/Accreditation (QAA) Frameworks and Social Justice

RESEARCH PURPOSE

The following is a survey in support of a research study examining how higher education quality assurance/accreditation (QAA) in the US facilitates and supports notions of quality beyond accountability to include more socially relevant oversight. A primary objective of the study is to produce a social justice framework for how QAA agencies may be more facilitative in aiding the higher education community in enhancing social justice efforts.

For purposes of this study, social justice is about understanding and interrogating how different individuals or groups are faring in comparison with others in a specific context (such as a university) or more broadly in society. This often involves the consideration of distributional issues, both in terms of distribution of advantages and disadvantages.

PARTICIPATION CRITERIA

You have been invited to participate in this research because you are a member of the professional higher education quality assurance/accreditation professional community and thus knowledgeable about higher education quality assurance/accreditation policies and procedures. Participants may hold professional and/or volunteer roles (e.g., staff, commission members, peer reviewers, etc.) within quality assurance/accreditation organizations. Your participation in this survey is voluntary. You may refuse to take part in the research or exit the survey at any time without penalty. You are free to decline to answer any particular question you do not wish to answer for any reason.

BENEFITS AND RISKS

There are no direct benefits from participating in this research survey; however, responses may contribute to a resource and/or understanding for alternative ways in which to provide to quality assurance measures to programs and institutions. There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this survey other than those encountered in day-to-day life. If you experience any discomfort, you are fee to discontinue your participation at any time or skip any question (s).

CONFIDENTIALITY

Your survey responses will be sent to a link via google forms where data will be stored in a password protected electronic format. No identifying information such as your name, email address, or IP address will be collected. Therefore, your responses will remain anonymous. No one will be able to identify you or your answers, and no one will know whether or not you participated in the study. Data will be stored for at least 3 to 5 years with adequate provisions to maintain confidentiality.

At the end of the survey you will be asked if you are interested in participating in a virtual focus group. If you choose to provide contact information such as your phone number or email address, your survey responses may no longer be anonymous to the researcher. However, no names or identifying information would be included in any publications or presentations based on these data, and your responses to this survey will remain confidential.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact me at kimberlee.moore@online.liverpool.ac.uk.

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or that your rights as a participant in research have not been honored during the course of this project, or you have any questions, concerns, or complaints that you wish to address to someone other than the investigator, you may contact my research supervisor, Professor Kalman Winston via email at kalman.winston@online.liverpool.ac.uk or the University of Liverpool Research Participant Advocate by phone at 001-612-312-1210 (USA number) or via email at liverpoolethics@ohecampus.com.

Thank you for agreeing to respond to this survey. The expected time to complete this survey is 15 to 20 minutes.

I have read and understood the above information. I understand that, because my answers will be fully anonymized, it will not be possible to withdraw them from the study once I have completed the survey. I consent to taking part in this survey, and I confirm that I am aged 18 or over.*

Agree

Organizational Affiliation

1.) Please note your affiliation (staff or volunteer) in the Quality Assurance/Accreditation community. Select only one.

- Institutional Accrediting Agency
- Programmatic/Specialized Agency
- Accreditation Membership Association (e.g. ASPA, CHEA, INQAAHE,etc.)

2.) Please note your Recognition affiliation (staff or volunteer) in the Quality

Assurance/Accreditation community. Select only one.
- United States Department of Education
- Council for Higher Education Accreditation
- Both
- None

3.) Where does your organization's focus fall on the quality continuum.
For purposes of this question, quality assurance refers to a focus on compliance, and quality enhancement refers to a focus on continuous quality improvement.

Quality Assurance

1
2
3
4
5
Quality Enhancement

Survey Questions

4.) Is there a role for social justice in quality assurance/ accreditation?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

4.a) If yes, how is this being actualized within your organization? Check all that apply

-
    Accreditation Standards, Policies, and Procedures
- Advocacy
- Professional Development for Volunteers (e.g. site visitors, peer reviewers, Board members, etc)
- Professional Development for Staff
- Educational Resources for Members
- Stakeholder Feedback from the Field
- Non-public/Internal Communications
- Informal Communications
- Internal Policies and Procedures
- Other:

5.) How important is the consideration of social justice issues in assessing quality?

Not important
1
2
3
4
5
Extremely important

6.) Does your organization have a definition for social justice or common reference point for discussing social justice issues as it relates to judgments of quality?
- Yes
- No
- I don't know

6.a) If yes, how does the definition differ from the following definition: social justice is about understanding and interrogating how different individuals or groups are faring in comparison with others in a specific context (such as a university) or more broadly in society. This often involves the consideration of distributional issues, both in terms of distribution of advantages and disadvantages.

7.) Does your organization have standards, policies, procedures, and/or informal expectations related to any of the following? Check all that apply:

- Access
- Diversity
- Inclusion
- Anti-racism
- Anti-discrimination
- Socioeconomic Disparities
- Health Disparities
- Digital Equity
- Social Equity
- Gender Disparities
- Physical and/or Mental Disabilities
- Faith-Based Discrimination
- Other:
-

8.) List the top three social justice priorities that your organization has identified, if any?

9.) Has your agency been to asked address/respond to social justice issues by stakeholders including members of the public, government, programs, institutions, students, employers, professional association, etc?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

9.a) If yes, please briefly explain what you were asked to respond to and how your organization responded.

10.) Given the recent calls in the US for collective responses to social injustice, specifically systemic/institutional racism, how has your organization responded? Check all that apply

- Changes in quality or accreditation standards, policies, and/or procedures
- Commission of research
- Creation, development, and/or distribution of educational resources
- Creation or expansion of committees, task-forces, working groups, etc.
- Professional development for staff, membership, and/or volunteers (Board members, peer reviewers, etc)
- Data Collection (e.g., Focus groups, town halls, listening campaigns, etc.)
- Organizational Statements
- Nothing

- I don't know
- Other:

11.) What activities do you think organizations might consider to help programs and/or institutions facilitate more attention to social justice issues? Check all that apply:

- Establishing data reporting requirements (including the disaggregation)
- Developing and/or revising accreditation standards, policies, and/or procedures
- Defining Social Justice
- Developing and revising internal organizational policies and procedures
- Soliciting greater involvement of programmatic and institutional stakeholders
- Sharing of best practices
- Training and professional development for staff and volunteers (Board members, peer reviewers, etc)
- Other:

12.) Given the traditional focus on accountability, accreditation organizations should incorporate more social justice aspects into quality assessments:

Strongly Disagree
1
2
3
4
5
Strongly Agree

If you agree, how might this be done?

Future Participation

13) Another component of this research study is a focus group. Would you be willing to participate in a virtual focus group on this topic?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

13.a) If yes or maybe, please include name and email address.

Appendix 4: Instructions for Survey Validation Assistance

Good afternoon,

Thank you for agreeing to provide feedback on a draft copy of my survey. You'll be receiving a short survey in google forms in a few minutes. I've provided some details below for your information.

Research Study Title:

Moving Beyond Accountability Toward a More Socially Conscious Guardianship of Higher Educational Quality: An Examination of Quality Assurance/Accreditation (QAA) Frameworks and Social Justice

Research Questions:

1. How are US QAA agencies incorporating social justice dimensions into their expectations for programs and/or institutions to address social justice concerns?
2. How do differences in QAA agencies' focus on assurance vs. enhancement influence how QAA agencies operationalize policies, standards and procedures for addressing social justice concerns?
3. What lessons if any can the US higher education QAA scheme learn from the South African QAA framework regarding the incorporation of social justice elements into the oversight of institutional and programmatic quality?
4. What more can be done by US QAA agencies to enhance responses to specific social justice concerns? What elements could be included in a framework to aid agencies in facilitating the mitigation of social justice issues?

Survey's Intended Audience:

- QAA professionals in the US including individuals from QA agencies, volunteers, associations, and/or private consulting

Feedback Needed:

In reviewing the survey, please consider providing feedback on the following:

- Do the survey questions support the aforementioned research questions
- Question Clarity
- Survey Format
- Survey Length
- Question Order
- Any additional question suggestions

- Any additional comments

Thank you in advance for your feedback. If you could please return your feedback to me by **COB, Friday, July 10th** that will be greatly appreciated.

Appendix 5: University of Liverpool Ethics Approval

Dear Kimberlee Moore,				
I am pleased to inform you that the EdD. Virtual Programme Research Ethics Committee (VPREC) has approved your application for ethical approval for your study. Details and conditions of the approval can be found below.				
Sub-Committee:		EdD. Virtual Programme Research Ethics Committee (VPREC)		
Review type:		Expedited		
PI:				
School:		Lifelong Learning		
Title:		Moving Beyond Accountability Toward a More Socially Conscious Guardianship of Higher Educational Quality: An Examination of Quality Assurance/Accreditation Frameworks and Social Justice		
First Reviewer:		Dr. José Reis Jorge		
Second Reviewer:		Dr. Mike Mimirinis		
Other members of the Committee		Dr. Lucilla Crosta, Dr. Kathleen Kelm, Dr. Mary Johnson, Dr. Gina Wisker.		
Date of Approval:		21/09/2019		
The application was APPROVED subject to the following conditions:				
Conditions				
1	Mandatory	M: All serious adverse events must be reported to the VPREC within 24 hours of their occurrence, via the EdD Thesis Primary Supervisor.		

This approval applies for the duration of the research. If it is proposed to extend the duration of the study as specified in the application form, the Sub-Committee should be notified. If it is proposed to make an amendment to the research, you should notify the Sub-Committee by following the Notice of Amendment procedure outlined at http://www.liv.ac.uk/media/livacuk/researchethics/notice%20of%20amendment.doc.

Where your research includes elements that are not conducted in the UK, approval to proceed is further conditional upon a thorough risk assessment of the site and local permission to carry out the research, including, where such a body exists, local research ethics committee approval. No documentation of local permission is required (a) if the researcher will simply be asking organizations to distribute research invitations on the researcher's behalf, or (b) if the researcher is using only public means to identify/contact participants. When medical, educational, or business records are analysed or used to identify potential research participants, the site needs to explicitly approve access to data for research purposes (even if the researcher normally has access to that data to perform his or her job).

Please note that the approval to proceed depends also on research proposal approval.

Kind regards,

Lucilla Crosta

Chair, EdD. VPREC