

Enhancing quality and alignment in theological education: A Dialogue with South Africa's higher education policies and church mission

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Abstract

The Council on Higher Education plays a pivotal role in ensuring the quality of theological education within South Africa's higher education landscape. Nonetheless, Private Theological Institutions (PTIs) have faced increased scrutiny in their operations for various reasons. This article aims to initiate a constructive dialogue between the operations of these institutions, South Africa's higher education policies, and the Church's theological education mission. Through critical reflection, a conceptual framework is proposed to align institutional practices with mandated educational policies. Drawing from Dakin's (1996) framework of Practical Theology – comprising experiential, reflective, and orientational levels – this study investigates how each level contributes to shaping, evaluating, and organising practical Christian knowledge within theological education. Additionally, the study assesses the existing praxis of theological education and accreditation, advocating for an African transformative approach that emphasises critical reflection and action for positive change. Ultimately, the paper recommends adopting a quality standard model that integrates theological education and training practices to better serve the evolving needs of the community.

Keywords

accreditation; council on higher education; Practical Theology; Theological Education and Training; transformative approach; Mission

1. Introduction

Theological education and training (TET)¹ provided by theological institutions are essential for serving the Church² and contributing to human development (Hauerwas 2015). As Tidwell (1996:13) noted, the educational ministry of the church is so crucial that its absence would threaten the very essence of the Church, and by implication, the prosperity of the world at large. This is because the Church's existence is rooted in the *Missio Dei*. Dames (2016: 224), in the discussion about *Missio Dei*, contended that it encompasses the concept of God the Father sending the Son, followed by both the Father and Son sending the Spirit. Furthermore, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit then commission the Church, designating them as active participants in the divine mission. The importance of TET for human development is clear in AGENDA 2063: The Africa We Want, which emphasises the need for education and training as a strategic basis for Africa's progress (Agang, Forster & Hendriks 2020).

TET has been understood and approached in various ways across the world, leading to different outcomes. Today, implementing and managing TET remains a complex concept that presents many challenges and opportunities as the Church strives to fulfil its mission (Bain & Hussey 2018:vx; Cairney 2018; Cole 2020:15). It is clear and essential that education and training continue to be the core mission of the Church, with the fulfilment of this duty consistently promoting sustenance and holistic development of Christian leaders.

1 Hartshorne (1946) contended that the essence of theological education defies a mere dictionary entry. Rather, he posited that its definition is forged within the crucible of institutions established by churches and their congregants, dedicated to equipping both men and women for leadership positions within the ecclesiastical realm.

2 The essence of the Church crystallizes when it recognizes itself as the assembly of individuals divinely selected to engage in the expansive mission enveloping all of creation (Sheridan & Hendriks, 2013). Dames (2016: 224) delves deeper into this concept of *Missio Dei*, designating the Church as the commissioned agents tasked with actively participating in God's overarching mission.

What is crucial and essential to this dialogue is how the Church currently fulfils this noble undertaking in light of the higher education policies outlined in the Higher Education Act, 101 of 1997³ (the Act). TET has undergone a significant transformation due to various factors, with Accreditation⁴ being one of the principal causes of these changes and subsequent developments. Teixeira & Landoni (2017: 21) reasoned that the higher education sector has experienced substantial policy changes in response⁵ to rapid socio-economic and political transformations. Similarly, Cole (2020:15) maintains that to fully understand the current state of theological education in Africa, it is crucial to consider not only the perspective of the Academy but also the influence of the contemporary Church environment.

While TET is foundational to the Church's mission and human development, South Africa's higher education reforms – especially standardised accreditation policies – have created tensions between secular academic expectations and TET's unique ministerial aims. Some scholars

3 The South African Government instituted the Act in 1997 to guide its efforts in rebuilding the country's unequal education system following the establishment of a new democratic government. [Online]. Available: <https://www.gov.za/documents/higher-education-act>.

4 Accreditation denotes the formal acknowledgement bestowed upon a programme for a defined duration after an assessment conducted by the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), affirming its adherence to prescribed benchmarks of excellence (CHE 2004: 33).

5 Baijnath emphasised this point, citing CHE (2016:143), which asserts that "Teaching and learning are inherently non-neutral". Every aspect carries an ideological nature... teaching and learning persist as profoundly political endeavours in all institutions, faculties, and disciplines. Consequently, it is not unexpected that during a period of significant social transformation, teaching and learning are subject to ideological expectations.

representing educational institutions (QAHE 2025⁶; WOCATI 2013⁷) argue that theological institutions should fully conform to national standards to ensure quality and legitimacy; however, we contend that such conformity should include the theological education's distinctive identity. We advocate for a balanced framework where academic rigour and spiritual formation are complementary, supported by integration of the quality assurance systems⁸ and dialogue that uphold both higher education standards and the Church's mission.

Educational reforms are implemented due to contextual analysis and recommendations based on the prevailing political and socio-economic conditions and technological advancements. Below, we provide a brief analysis of the context in which the reforms took place.

2. Background

Before 1997, the Church in South Africa had autonomy over its training and higher education programmes (Dunsmuir & McCoy 2015). However, changes to the higher education landscape prompted the post-apartheid

6 The International Association for Quality Assurance in Pre-Tertiary and Higher Education (QAHE) [Online]. Available from <https://www.qahe.org/article/accreditation-for-seminaries-schools-of-theology-in-south-africa-ensuring-quality-theological-education/?utm>

7 World Conference of Associations of Theological Institutions (WOCATI) underscores the adherence to national standards as essential for maintaining the quality and credibility of theological education programmes [Online] Available: <https://www.wocati.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/2013-Challenges-and-Promises-of-Quality-Assurance-in-Theological-Education-WOCATI.pdf?utm>

8 Quality Assurance Systems here represents both the Internal Quality Assurance System (IQAS) by the Higher Education institution and the External Quality Assurance System (EQAS) by the CHE as the regulator.

government to reform⁹ the education system by introducing legislation that established the Council on Higher Education (CHE).

The Quality Council¹⁰ on Higher Education, CHE is an autonomous statutory entity that provides counsel to the Minister of Higher Education and Training¹¹ on all matters related to higher education. Additionally, it bears the responsibility of ensuring and advancing quality standards via the Higher Education Quality Committee. (Council on Higher Education 2019: iii). The CHE was created because of an Act passed by the democratic government. This Act aimed to tackle the educational inequality within the country and rebuild the education system for the betterment of the nation. According to the South African Government (1997: 2), the Act has the objective:

To regulate higher education; to provide for the establishment, composition, and functions of a Council on Higher Education; to provide for the establishment, governance, and funding of public higher education institutions; to provide for the appointment and

9 Teixeira & Landoni (2017) provide further insight into this subject by affirming that the realm of higher education is presently experiencing swift and unparalleled growth. This, coupled with rapid socio-economic and political transformations, necessitates policy reforms within the higher education sector.

10 CHE is a Quality Council as established by the NQF Act, no 67 of 2008, and its role is further updated in the NQF Amendment Act 12 of 2019, which updates and strengthens the regulatory framework for qualifications and ensures greater alignment between educational standards and the needs of the South African economy. [Online]. Available: https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201908/4264619-8act12of2019natqualificationsframeamendact.pdf

11 The Ministry of Higher Education and Training has undergone a recent transformation, now bearing the name Higher Education, Science, and Innovation. This change is emblematic of its widened purview and redirected emphasis. [Online]. Available: https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201908/4264619-8act12of2019natqualificationsframeamendact.pdf

functions of an independent assessor; to provide for the registration of private higher education institutions; to provide for quality assurance and quality promotion in higher education; to provide for transitional arrangements and the repeal of certain laws, and to provide for matters connected therewith.

The South African Government's endeavours to reform the nation's educational system and policies have elicited a varied response from stakeholders in theological education. Scholars (Anderson 2001; Cheeseman 2006; Farisani 2010) have underscored various encounters in the accreditation processes that affect PTIs. It should be noted that theological training does not necessarily equip students for secular employment. As a result, some of the objectives of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) do not provide significant benefits to theological graduates who are primarily preparing for ministry in the Church. In many instances, churches, faith-based organisations, and affiliated ministries do not regard NQF-accredited qualifications as a prerequisite for appointing individuals into ministry or their employment.¹² This differentiation is merely one among several that persistently delineate education geared towards Church ministry from that intended for secular vocations.

Dreyer (2007: 2) posits that the intersection of religion and education remains a contentious topic in South Africa and globally. It is imperative not to overlook the disparity in the aims of education and training,¹³ as it could shed light on the underlying causes behind the closure of several

12 University of Maryland, Department of Anthropology (2010). In *Strategies for faith-based organisations: staffing decisions, discusses the considerations and patterns of hiring in faith-based organisations across different church traditions* [Online]. Available: <https://sp2.upenn.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Strategies-Staffing.pdf>

13 Jansen et al. (2009), in *Education and the Role of the church in Africa: Three Relevant Aspects*. Discussed these differing aims of education and training between the State and Church. The church's educational initiatives are often grounded in theological imperatives, such as moral and ethical development, spiritual formation and evangelistic mission, while the state's aims are socioeconomic and national priorities.

theological training institutions, the ongoing shutdown processes of others, and the enduring challenges faced by some in sustaining their operations and attaining accreditation (Mashabela 2017: 6; Higher Education and Training 2023: 10-179).

Mzangwa & Dede (2019) explored the evolution of educational policies and perspectives in Ghana, Tanzania, the UK, and the USA, contrasting them with South Africa's theoretical framework. Their findings underscore the significant impact theologians have had on the conceptual evolution of higher education. In post-1994 South Africa, a discernible transformation unfolded in the role played by theologians and theological institutions, precipitating disparities in access to higher education between private and public institutions. This phenomenon serves as a poignant indicator of a prevailing bias against traditional theological education within the framework of post-democratic higher education policies. Disparities in access between private and public higher education include legislative and policy shifts¹⁴, Accreditation and recognition challenges,¹⁵ funding disparities,¹⁶ curricular and pedagogical innovations¹⁷ and student equity¹⁸.

14 In Cloete, N., Maassen, P., & Fehnel, R. (2006). *Transformation in Higher Education: Global Pressures and Local Realities in South Africa* provides a detailed analysis of the higher education reforms in South Africa and discusses the impacts on various types of institutions, including theological seminaries.

15 Fehnel R, In N. Cloete, R. Fehnel, P. Maassen, & T. Moja (Eds.). *Transformation in Higher Education: Global Pressures and Local Realities in South Africa* (p 227–243), Chapter 10: Private Higher Education, discusses the challenges faced by private institutions in navigating the accreditation landscape post-1994.

16 Wolhuter (2023) addresses the issue of funding in higher education, comparing global patterns with South Africa as a case study.

17 Koske (2024) discusses contemporary curriculum concerns for theological education in Africa. While Le Grange (2016) discussed broader curriculum changes in South Africa.

18 Jappie (2020) discusses access, equity and admission in South African higher education.

Lunenburg (2017) refers to Weber's 1947 classic analysis of bureaucracy and highlights the significance of policies and statutory frameworks in promoting societal benefits. These policies aim to address inequalities and prevent further oppression among marginalised communities, particularly concerning fundamental human and civil rights. In democratic countries like Ghana, Tanzania, and South Africa, among others, laws governing social and public institutions, including education, are required to uphold equality. Non-discriminatory policies are vital for meeting the needs of vulnerable populations, such as providing access to housing and supportive social environments. Consequently, policy development and implementation play a crucial role in addressing these societal challenges.

Houston (2013:875) emphasises the importance of maintaining and enhancing standards,¹⁹ while also stressing the importance of accountability to a range of stakeholders, such as the board, staff, students, churches, governmental bodies, donors, and society.

The CHE is responsible for quality assurance in higher education, including theological education, which shapes TET in South Africa. However, Cheeseman (2006:133) argues that accreditation bodies like the CHE may lack expertise in spiritual development and Christian ministry, leading to inadequate policies for training Church ministers. Considering these observations, corroborated by the insights of Dames (2017), it becomes evident that traits such as moral formation, critical consciousness, and reflective thinking and action hold equal, if not greater, importance in theological education. Therefore, there arises a need to revise education policies to incorporate the principles of spiritual development and Christian ministry alongside traditional accreditation criteria.

19 Barr (2004) delved into the matter of quality within private higher education, noting governments' adoption of evaluation and accreditation mechanisms to address apprehensions regarding the quality standards of numerous private institutions.

2.1 Present implications and research objectives

The operations of PTIs have faced growing scrutiny²⁰ for various reasons,²¹ among others, Mzondi (2024) provides a historical and theological reflection on honorary PhD degrees conferred by a noted private theological institution from 2010 to 2024. This practice contravenes the CHE's (2024) Good Practice Guide²², which stipulates that only public higher institutions have such a privilege. Similarly, in a *Carte Blanche* exposé aired on 12 March 2023, profiling an institution not accredited by the CHE to provide higher education, the Immanuel University of Theology International, which awards all sorts of qualifications in the name of the church. Consequently, reputable, accredited institutions²³ are being overshadowed by unscrupulous fly-by-night operations prioritising profits over delivering quality education.²⁴

20 In an exposé, *Prophets for profit*, *Carte Blanche* aired a story on 12 March 2023 profiling an institution not accredited by the CHE to provide higher education, the Immanuel University of Theology International, awarding all sorts of qualifications in the name of the church [Online]. Available: <https://youtu.be/WI1vWcCWZw0?si=g1N5vSFO-HHUI77G>.

21 According to the 2025 Department of Higher Education & Training's list, known as the Register of Private Higher Education Institutions, last updated on 12 March 2025, the known reasons for non-accreditation include institutions whose registration has lapsed or been cancelled, as well as those that have requested the Registrar to discontinue their registration. Additionally, it encompasses institutions that have chosen not to seek national registration or accreditation, while continuing to offer education and training, as such called bogus.

22 Section 65C of the Higher Education Act no 101 of 1997, as amended, empowers only public higher education institutions to confer an honorary degree (CHE 2024).

23 Tankou epse Nukunah et al. (2019) aimed to address the perceived lack of trust in Private Higher Education Institutions in South Africa.

24 Teixeira Pedro et al. (2017) extensively explore the significance of private higher education.

In response, the Department of Higher Education and Training periodically publishes a report known as the Register of Private Higher Education Institutions. This register identifies institutions with misrepresented or invalid qualifications. As per the report last updated on August 6, 2023, from the Registry of Private Higher Education Institutions,²⁵ there is a stark reality regarding PTIs (Higher Education & Training 2023). The publication from Higher Education and Training delineates various classifications for diverse types of accreditations and institutes, as depicted in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Registration²⁶ Categories

Accreditation Standing of Institutions	2023
Accredited Institutions	19
Provisionally accredited	4
Accreditation cancelled or lapsed	8
Bogus/Illegal	36
Over-all Picture	67

According to Higher Education and Training (2023:10-179), out of 67 theological institutions recorded by the Department of Higher Education and Training, only 19 are accredited, 4 are provisionally accredited, 8 had their accreditation cancelled or lapsed, and 36 are recorded as bogus and illegal. In 2025, the updated report indicates that only 16 theological institutions are registered, and 4 are provisionally accredited.²⁷

25 The Department of Higher Education and Training publishes the Register of Private Higher Education Institutions regularly. [Online]. Available: https://www.dhet.gov.za/Registers_DocLib/Register%20of%20Private%20Higher%20Education%20Institutions%2006%20August%202023.pdf.

26 The term “registration” as utilised in official records of the Department of Higher Education and Training is synonymous with “accreditation” within this article’s dialogue (DHET 2023, 2025).

27 The Department of Higher Education and Training registers for private higher education institutions. Available: https://www.dhet.gov.za/Registers_DocLib/Register%20of%20Private%20Colleges%202020%20January%202025.pdf

Dunsmuir & McCoy (2015:39) argued that contemporary educational policies delineate two spheres: one bound by legislative mandates and the other characterised by a dearth of regulations, thereby prompting ecclesiastical bodies to chart their course in ministerial training. This underscores the imperative for adaptation to both societal exigencies and individual potential, compelling the exploration of innovative methodologies to address evolving needs. Mashabela (2017:4) underscores the pivotal role of theological education in Africa, emphasising its function in equipping clergy and laity for holistic community development, encompassing spiritual, socioeconomic, and political emancipation. The interconnected nature of societal sectors underscores how alterations in one domain resonate across others, posing inherent challenges. Accreditation bodies such as CHE and PTIs confront challenges that directly reverberate within the theological education landscape, necessitating institutional flexibility to align with accreditation requirements (Degbe 2015:189).

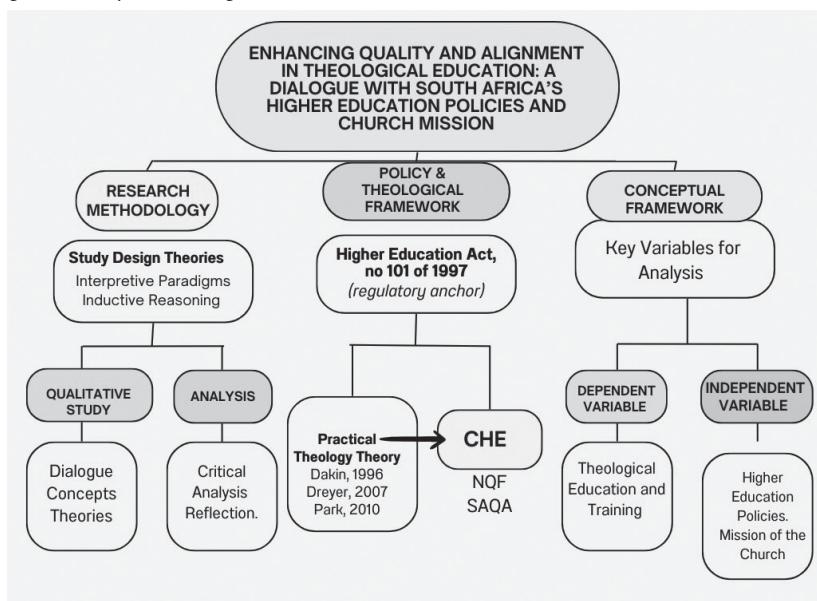
Scholars like Farisani (2010), Naidoo (2013), and Resane (2018) express concerns about accreditation in theological education, questioning alignment with the Church's education mission. Dunsmuir & McCoy (2015:38) probe the CHE's support for pastoral training, and Anderson (2001:297) notes a trend towards increased academic requirements potentially detracting from practical ministry experience. The objective of this study is to connect higher education policies with the mission of the Church in theological education, aiming to create mutual benefits for TET.

2.2 Policy and theological framework

The policy and theological framework entail the amalgamation of diverse policies and theological perspectives advanced by scholars within the realm of Practical Theology. This framework provides a foundation for comprehending the current research and illuminates how the authors have utilised these theories to interpret the associated data. Mensah et al. (2020), advocating for a theoretical framework, affirmed that such a framework should encompass insights from leaders in the field of research regarding the research topic and the problem under investigation. It may also entail recommendations for addressing the problem, including approaches for interpreting the data findings.

Mensah et al. (2020) further proposed that such a framework should serve as a graphical depiction illustrating the interconnections among the concepts studied. Mouton and Marais (1996: 136) corroborate this assertion, affirming that the nature of a framework (Conceptual or theoretical) is shaped by the role it is intended to fulfil. The following policy and theological framework present a structured approach that integrates three critical domains: Research Methodology, Policy and Theological Framework, and Conceptual Framework.

Figure 1: Policy and Theological Framework



Under Research Methodology, the framework highlights the use of qualitative study design theories rooted in interpretive paradigms, dialogue theory, and critical reflection, suitable for examining the interplay between theology and policy. The central section, Policy and Theological Framework, acknowledges the dual influence of regulatory structures and theological disciplines. Here, the Higher Education Act No. 101 of 1997 is designated as a regulatory anchor, reflecting its role in shaping the compliance obligations of theological institutions. In parallel, Practical Theology Theory – as represented by scholars such as Dakin (1996), Dreyer

(2007), and Park (2010) – offers an ecclesial and ministerial lens through which theological education is articulated and interpreted. The arrow line connecting these two elements symbolises their dialogical relationship rather than a hierarchical derivation. The Council on Higher Education (CHE) and its quality assurance tools (NQF, SAQA) serve as mediating entities within this framework. Lastly, the Conceptual Framework clarifies the key variables, where theological education and training (dependent variable) are shaped by the influence of higher education policy and the mission of the church (independent variables).

Collectively, Figure 1 visually captures the complex yet necessary integration of policy, theology, and educational design in the pursuit of quality theological education in South Africa. Scholars often state that theory plays a crucial role in scientific research by offering a logical foundation for explaining phenomena and guiding systematic inquiry (Zikmund 2003; Cooper & Schindler 2001). This ensures the presence of order and methodological rigour.

3. Triad approach to practical theology

Practical Theology is often misunderstood as being in opposition to the theoretical or abstract aspects of theology, but this is a common misconception (Schweitzer 2013). Smith (2013:70) contends that Practical Theology is the theological discipline dedicated to examining Christian praxis. This encompasses critically reflecting on and enhancing actions and practices to enrich the manifestation of the Christian faith. Smith's (2013:13) depiction of Practical Theology situates it not as a dismissal of theoretical or abstract constructs but rather as a field striving to develop action-based theories subject to critical assessment and empirical scrutiny, akin to other academic endeavours (Schweitzer 2013).

The field of theological education has undergone significant transformations in recent decades, and one of the most remarkable ones is the widespread adoption of an expansive understanding of Practical Theology. This perspective is now widely embraced by scholars and educators in the field, who recognise that theology is inherently practical, and its application is shaped by the specific context in which it is practised (Steyn & Masango 2011; Graham 2017; Dames 2017). Practical Theology represents a response

to the divine call and a recognition that our purpose in the world is to align ourselves with God's purposes (Veling 2005:12).²⁸ These realisations have brought about a new level of confidence among those who embrace this new paradigm of theological education (Martin 2004; Scharen 2008).

Park (2010) outlines several important characteristics of Practical Theology. These include its transformative nature, its contextual and situational relevance, its focus on personal experience, its integrative and interdisciplinary approach, its ability to analyse and construct new ideas, and its reliance on disciplined and dialectical thinking. Dames (2017) echoes these ideas as he positions Practical Theology as an interdisciplinary field that helps address crises. He also emphasises the importance of practical theologians defining their work within specific and local contexts.

Dakin's (1996:203) triad approach to Practical Theology – comprising experiential, reflective, and orientational components – provides a valuable analytical framework for this study. Smith (2013:13) stresses the importance of asking relevant questions to thoroughly assess the research landscape, envision ideal scenarios, and develop practical solutions. Mensah (2020) observed that theoretical frameworks often offer solutions to research challenges. The following section illustrates how the authors apply Dakin's (1996) triad approach in reflecting on, analysing, and proposing solutions based on the study's results.

4. Application of the triad approach

Dakin (1996) introduces three key levels of Practical Theology – experiential, reflective, and orientational to advance practical Christian knowledge. These levels, informed by literature and observations, guided data collection, pattern exploration, method discovery, and action planning for effective TET. Dakin's (1996) triad approach provides a flexible and

28 This comprehension finds reinforcement in the words of the Psalmist, who observed, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it on the seas and established it on the waters" (Psalm 24:1–2). Hazle (2009) further elaborates on this perspective in contemporary Practical Theology and investigates its ramifications for mission.

practical solution that connects the activities of PTIs, higher education policies, and the Church's mission in theological education and training.

(a) The Dakin Model

Dakin's (1996) triad approach in Practical Theology is composed of three dimensions: experiential, reflective, and orientational. This approach was further elucidated by Freire (2005). To effectively analyse higher education policy and address the functions of PTIs, it is imperative to possess a highly effective analytical tool capable of comprehensively addressing both policy and institutional requirements. Walker & Fisher (2013) suggest that when viewed from an argumentative perspective, policy analysis is more akin to a "craft" than a science, relying on practical expertise. Deliberative experts play a crucial role in interpreting and reconciling diverse analytical frameworks and local assessments, including citizens' situational knowledge. Policy discussions that incorporate multiple voices ensure a fair and comprehensive approach to policy analysis.

According to Beaudoin (2005), Thomas Groome's contribution to religious education includes five main components: 1) portraying the knowing subject as existential, 2) embracing liberational aspects, 3) considering pedagogy, 4) recognising theological dimensions, and 5) incorporating critical pedagogy. Groome developed a Shared Praxis Approach to Christian education based on these foundational principles. Additionally, Marangos (2002:190) describes liberation education within the Church as involving a critical examination of Christian practice guided by Scriptural principles.

Christian education is crucial in promoting social transformation and liberation. This viewpoint is supported by scholars such as Freire (2005). As per the writings of Freire & Shor (1987: 109), education is regarded as a political endeavour capable of either maintaining the current status quo or enabling individuals to pursue personal, social, and political liberation through critical conscientization. Dakin's (1996) triad approach expands on these concepts and offers an analytical tool to foster dialogue between the expectations of higher education policies and the Church's mission of TET.

(b) Experiential

As Freire (2005) argued, the vitality of human existence depends on truth, not falsehood, and the ability of individuals to work together to transform the world. Dialogue is therefore essential to human flourishing, as no one person can speak for everyone. Dakin's (1996) experiential-level framework offers a useful structure for exploring the questions raised by such dialogue.

In this instance, the dialogue aims to establish common ground between the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and the provision of TET by PTIs. This concern emerged following the enactment of legislation, which revealed that numerous PTIs failed to meet the expected standards for higher education (Council on Higher Education 1997). Specifically, this issue pertains to PTIs operating within the higher education sector (Higher Education & Training 2023). The fundamental issue arises from the absence of structured communication and collaboration between the Church's mission in providing theological education and the standards outlined by the NQF, as regulated by the CHE. This gap has led to misalignment between the educational objectives of PTIs and the formal requirements of higher education, resulting in challenges in accreditation, curriculum standardisation, and overall recognition of theological qualifications.

(c) Reflective

According to Freire (2005:109), reflecting on situationality means reflecting on the very condition of existence and discovering each other's position through critical thinking. When critical reflection leads to action, it results in an authentic praxis that involves a reciprocal action-reflection approach (Freire 2005:26). Below is a framework that addresses who and how questions at the reflective level should be approached.

In response to "Who is involved"? the introduction of this study has identified the PTIs and the CHE as the agencies involved in this phenomenon. How is this happening? Observations indicate that when PTIs offer higher education and training beyond the prescribed requirements, they come into conflict with CHE's mission (Higher Education & Training 2023). How does this affect Christian ministry? Table 1 above revealed a staggering number of thirty-six (36) theological institutions classified as bogus. This underscores the need for TET provision and resolving the misalignment to the required standards in the provision of higher education.

(d) Orientational

Freire (2005:66) contends that reflection and action are essential to prevent the erroneous separation of humanity's essence from its historical context. The transition from mere action to activism arises when theology interacts with culture (Dames 2021). Practical Theology inherently incorporates both rational and faith-based viewpoints (Dakin 1996). Nevertheless, it's crucial to acknowledge that the learning cultures advocated by PTIs, and the CHE are not necessarily congruent (Cheeseman 2006; Naidoo 2013). Therefore, this dialogue aims to explore and consider practical theological reflections, practices, and responses that are relevant to the topic. of the relevant practical theological reflections, practices, and responses are provided.

Smith (2013:114) argues that theology possesses practical value precisely because of its inherent nature – that is, its grounding in lived human experience and its ongoing concern with discerning God's presence and will in everyday realities. Unlike abstract disciplines, theology is inherently oriented toward praxis, community transformation, and spiritual discernment. This makes it particularly suited to engage real-life issues and social complexities from a faith-informed perspective. Consequently, this form of practical theological inquiry becomes essential for addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by TET, enabling it to remain both academically rigorous and ministerially relevant.

Practical Theology engages in various dialogues, such as reflective, critical, communicative, interpretive, hermeneutical, and correlational dialogues, to provide fresh insights into specific contexts (Park 2010:5). We present a reflective and critical justification of Practical Theology, utilising hermeneutical and correlational dialogues between literature and observation to shed light on TET provided by PTIs.

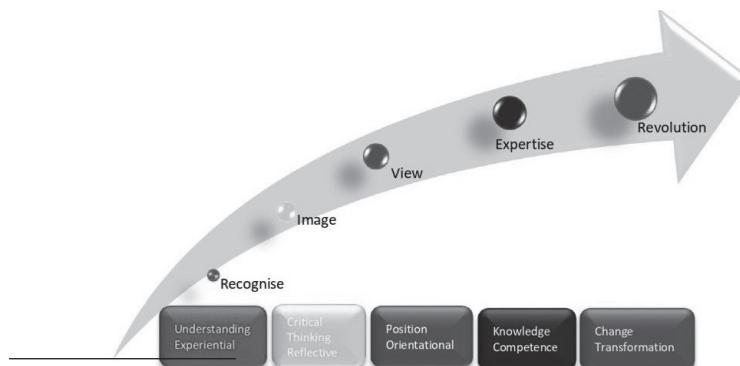
5. Recommendation: RIVER Model of Change

We advocate for a pragmatic approach that integrates an African transformative outlook to reconcile the growing disparities between CHE policies and the mission of PTIs in delivering TET. Following a thorough examination of the educational and training objectives of both PTIs and CHE (Cheeseman 2006; Naidoo 2013), along with a comprehensive review of

pertinent literature, we put forth the River Model of Change – a conceptual, stage-by-stage model – as the proposed solution.²⁹ The foundational elements of this model consist of five consecutive stages, rooted in the principles outlined by Dakin (1996). Subsequently, the authors have elaborated on the remaining stages to ensure their relevance.

These stages propose that policymakers and implementers should recognise the connections between available data on time horizons and strategic objectives. They additionally recommend employing methodologies like the Shared Praxis Approach (Groome 1980) to tackle educational policy-related challenges, which necessitate reflective critical thinking and an ontological viewpoint. Building on Dakin's ideas, the authors highlight the importance of competence in knowledge development, comprehension, and results-based application. Moreover, they introduce a concluding stage aimed at fortifying this proposition, fostering desired change with transformative advantages that advance social transformation (Freire 2005). The subsequent sections succinctly elucidate how each stage constitutes a viable recommendation for practice, offering a transformative, critical, and reflexive model applicable to an African context.

Figure 2: River Model of Change



29 The River Model of Change (2022) was first published as part of a doctoral thesis by Caswell J. Ntseno, supervised by Prof Gordon E. Dames, titled: Higher Education Policies and Institutional Theological Education Needs: A Practical Theological Exploration with Specific Reference to Private Theological Institutions in South Africa. [Online]. Available: https://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/29216/theis_ntseno_cj.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

(a) Ability to recognise and understand: Recognise (R)

The first stage (R) highlights the significance of acknowledging and understanding the human experience as a critical element of successful problem-solving.³⁰ The PTIs' challenges related to TET provision cannot be divorced from human existence. Dakin (1996) proposed that in addressing human experience, it is crucial to comprehend the circumstances and timing of such interactions. The authors have also included a reflective question that addresses the metacognitive aspect of the "how" in the procedural dimension.

The authors posit that this aligns with the rationale from Dakin's model, which addresses the question of "why" behind an experience. Loyola Institute Ministry (LIM) model (2000) and Osmer's model (2011),³¹ also, explore this subject when grappling with the hermeneutical query of determining the true state. PTIs, as practitioners of Practical Theology, can leverage this primary stage to draw upon the practices and experiences of church life, ultimately providing a rationale for Christian action and reflection via education.

(b) Critical thinking reflective: Image (I)

To accomplish success at this stage, an institution must employ critical thinking skills that encompass both rudimentary and sophisticated levels of thinking, as outlined by Bloom, Mesia, and Krathwohl (1964) in

30 The human condition can be comprehended by various recurring structures, categorised into four primary forms: biological, aesthetic, intellectual, and dramatic. For further exploration of these structures, one can consult Walmsley's (2008) discussion of Lonergan's philosophical pluralism, as well as Lonergan's (1992) examination of the importance of human experience in epistemology and comprehension.

31 The Loyola Institute of Ministry (LIM) Model (Cowan 2000) and Osmer's (2011) four-step model for theological reflection and research exhibit resemblances. These steps involve identifying an actual issue, interpreting the present state of the world, envisioning an ideal world, and comprehending our existing responsibilities. Consequently, this paper will comprehensively analyse and juxtapose these two models.

their endeavour to portray a comprehensive depiction of their institution (image). Critical thinking involves analysing a situation to identify areas for improvement (Paul & Elder, 2009). This description highlights the importance of engaging in deep thinking regarding CHE policies and the PTIs' missional goals. A foundational aspect of this process entails recognising that Practical Theology encompasses all human activities from a Christian viewpoint, thereby ensuring that Christian education aligns with established educational standards (Dakin 1996). This reflective critical thinking process about the institution's procedures, policies, and strategies provides an image that can be used to evaluate the internal quality assurance system (IQAS) towards improvement and implementation (Hidayat et al 2017).

(c) Positional and orientational capability: View (V)

Orientation encompasses a cultural perspective, paradigm, and worldview, with an interplay existing between ontological and epistemological positions. Ontology and orientation centre on the experience of reality, while the epistemological stance delves into how we acquire knowledge about that reality and the validity of our understanding. (Mackenzie & Knipe 2006).

Reflecting on this dimension provides a foundation for the entire process of reflection. The engagement of theology with culture means that Practical Theology always incorporates the perspectives of reason and faith, making it apologetic and missiological (Dakin 1996). Thus, theological education is solely based on these positions regarding reality and knowledge.

TET should integrate Ubuntu into Competency-Based Theological Education (CBTE)³² to create a contextually grounded and transformative model for Africa (Dames 2021). Ubuntu's emphasis on communal identity, relational responsibility, and service aligns naturally with CBTE's focus on human formation and vocational integrity (Mzondi 2022). While CBTE defines competence through knowledge, skills, and behaviours (ATS 2024),

32 The Association of Theological Schools (2024) provides guidelines on competency-based theological education [Online]. Available: <https://www.ats.edu/files/galleries/guidelines-for-cbte-programs.pdf>.

Ubuntu enriches this by underscoring ethical leadership, empathy, and community accountability. Both frameworks value personalised learning journeys and demonstrated growth over rigid timelines. Integrating Ubuntu into CBTE enables theological institutions to form leaders who are not only academically capable but also spiritually mature and committed to communal flourishing.

Consequently, it is crucial to implement a credit system for short courses, regardless of their format. Regulated professions can have an impact on this by incorporating it into their continuous professional development (CPD) programmes. The PTIs' operations are a combination of training and education, which is both professional and academic. This orientational capability should position institutions' internal quality assurance (IQA) towards collaboration with the external quality assurance (EQA) as envisioned in the CHE institutional audits guide³³(CHE 2021: 22).

(d) Knowledge, comprehension, and application: Expertise (E)

The development of Expertise (E), which refers to practical Christian knowledge used for evaluating, ordering, localising, and organising, relies on three crucial stages: R, I, and V. To achieve expertise, one needs a comprehensive understanding of accreditation and standardisation concerning CHE requirements, an understanding of the reasoning behind these requirements, and the ability to execute them correctly. A closer examination reveals that Practical Theology is closely linked to educational and social sciences, as previously noted by Dakin (1996) and Dames (2013). Practical Theology has evolved from a monodisciplinary approach to an interdisciplinary one, with a focus on bringing about positive change in both the church and society.

Expertise required to operate at the level proposed by the CHE includes evidence-based demonstration of an implemented and management of IQAS and all the relevant mechanisms to support both the academic

33 Further on institutional audits for PHEIs, See CHE (2021), Supplementary Guide for the Institutional Audits of Private Higher Education Institutions. [Online]. Available: <https://www.che.ac.za/publications/frameworks/supplementary-guide-institutional-audits-pheis>.

and administrative aspects of the institution (CHE 2021: 9). The required expertise must be complemented with a clear direction influenced by the mission and vision of the institution.

To ensure that IQAS reflect not only technical compliance but also relational integrity and communal well-being, the philosophy of *Ubuntu* must be intentionally integrated. Rooted in the values of inclusive participation, shared accountability, and collective discernment, *Ubuntu* challenges institutions to move beyond isolated administrative metrics toward quality human systems at institutions such as Unisa and SATS³⁴ that cultivate a culture of trust, mutual respect, and holistic stakeholder engagement. By embedding this communal ethic into IQAS, institutions affirm that true quality emerges not merely from procedural adherence but from the strength of relationships and the shared pursuit of excellence

(e) Desired change and transformation: Revolution (R)

The model comprises a series of stages that facilitate individuals in reframing their experiences and situations, thereby paving the way for new possibilities. The initial three stages – Recognise, Image, and View – contribute to the cultivation of Expertise, which denotes practical knowledge grounded in Christian principles. Once these stages are concluded, a transformative strategy can materialise, giving rise to a Revolution (R+I+V+E=R) (Dames 2021).

Mzangwa & Dede (2019) assert that the evolution of higher education is indicative of societal progress. They advocate for amalgamating social perspectives with efforts to establish meaningful, transformative outcomes. The authors propose the RIVER Model of change as a solution for educational challenges within the realm of Practical Theology, aiming to bridge the gap between higher education policies and the Church's theological education mission.

Additionally, Dames (2013) underscores Practical Theology's ability to transcend this gap by upholding its theological principles while actively engaging in dialogue with the social sciences. This approach ensures

34 Unisa: University of South Africa (www.unisa.ac.za); SATS : South African Theological Seminary (www.sats.ac.za)

that the quality and alignment of TET with higher education policies are effectively integrated into the broader mission of theological education.

(f) Quality assurance framework and RIVER Model for Change Integration

While quality assurance is widely recognised as crucial, there is no universal consensus on the required procedures. Different bodies employ varying criteria and processes, with some viewing it more as a political tool than a means to safeguard learners' interests. This complexity can burden providers, especially those in survivalist categories, diverting them from delivering high-quality education. The primary focus is compromised due to the time and resources dedicated to compliance. Further research is required to determine whether these regulatory systems have effectively improved teaching and learning outcomes.

In this last section, the authors advocate for the integration of the new Quality Assurance Framework (QAF)³⁵ with the RIVER Model for change. The objective is to present a collaborative strategy that bridges the gap between higher education policies and the provision of TET by PTIs. By blending the underlying principles of the QAF with the RIVER Model, the authors demonstrate their alignment and showcase the model's flexibility in the context of higher education.

The relationship between the CHE and PHEIs, particularly PTIs, has evolved over time to fulfil the obligations stipulated in the Act. The agency's plans involve incorporating self-evaluation and peer review, in line with international practices. The QAF, which was introduced to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in a draft consultation document in July 2020, will shape the CHE's interactions with all HEIs and the conduct of institutional audits.

35 For further details on QAF see, CHE, 2021 *A Quality Assurance Framework for Higher Education in South Africa*. [Online]. Available: <https://www.che.ac.za/publications/frameworks/quality-assurance-framework-qaf-higher-education-south-africa>.

The updated QAF strives to guarantee that institutions have implemented efficient Internal Quality Assurance (IQA)³⁶ systems. These systems offer a supportive structure for delivering high-quality programs, effective student assistance, adaptable learning formats, and inventive teaching approaches to improve accessibility, retention, and academic achievement (CHE 2021). The QAF is grounded on the following principles:

1. Institutional Responsibility and Accountability for IQA
2. Integration
3. Fitness for Purpose and Fitness of Purpose
4. Differentiation
5. Simplification
6. Collaboration
7. Innovation

As per CHE (2021), the revised process of institutional audits builds upon insights gleaned from the initial cycle, embracing a more targeted, diversified³⁷ approach, and a simplified approach. The RIVER Model of

36 In CHE (2020), IQA represents the Integrated Institutional System, Policies, and Processes. These mechanisms are employed by institutions to oversee the quality of their fundamental functions, including learning and teaching, research, and community engagement. The efficacy of these IQA systems is gauged by the institution's outcomes. Conversely, External Quality Assurance (EQA) pertains to the process through which an external agency verifies that institutions have implemented IQA systems to oversee the quality of their activities and educational offerings. EQA also ensures that the qualifications and programs offered by these institutions have undergone peer review to meet the quality standards and criteria established by CHE.

37 In CHE's (2021) discourse, the term used is "differentiation", which encapsulates a nuanced approach reflecting the functional distinctions inherent among institutions, encompassing variations in identity, mission, and maturity in quality management. The Framework for Institutional Audits highlights the importance of recognizing and managing these functional

change incorporates the seven QAF principles and follows a five-stage process that supports the first and second principles of institutional responsibility and integration. The first stage of the RIVER Model, Recognise, emphasises the importance of institutions gaining a comprehensive understanding of their abilities and responsibilities, promoting accountability for quality assurance. By following this model, institutions can develop an integration strategy that connects all aspects of quality assurance activities, including both EQA by the CHE and IQA by the Institution. This approach will ultimately lead to the establishment of a distinct identity, aligning with the Recognise stage of the RIVER Model.

Creating a cohesive vision and mission for a higher education institution requires utilising reflective and critical thinking during the *Image* stage of the RIVER Model. To ensure that the institution aligns with the IQA system both vertically and horizontally, it is crucial to maintain an active IQA system while also upholding lateral ties to the EQA system promoted by CHE. By adopting this inclusive approach, institutions can confidently meet the mandates of both the CHE and PTIs, ultimately promoting *fitness for purpose*.

The View stage involves a paradigm shift, which means taking on a new perspective. This new perspective involves having a thorough understanding of higher education policies and the quality assurance systems that go along with them, such as IQA and EQA. This phase demonstrates that an institution has a mature understanding and implementation of higher education policies. At this stage, institutions should have a strong IQA system in place that aligns with their mission and vision. Institutions that show mastery at this level can use integrated institutional quality assurance dashboards to keep track of their progress. This third stage aligns with both the *differentiation and simplification* principles of the QAF.

The Expertise stage of the Model is closely connected to the Collaboration principle in the QAF. This stage assumes that PTIs have already obtained accreditation from the CHE or have received a favourable institutional

disparities through differentiation. Conversely, the QAF pivots its focus towards evaluating the maturity of quality management within institutions.

audit report.³⁸ To complete the accreditation process and meet higher education standards, institutions must effectively integrate all relevant systems. This includes demonstrating the necessary knowledge and skills to collaborate with internal and external proficiency systems and meet the requirements set by regulatory bodies. By aligning the Collaboration principle of the QAF with the Expertise stage of the Model, institutions can successfully achieve accreditation, benefiting both PTIs and the CHE's goals.

The last phase of this model, labelled as “Revolution,” hinges on the final principle of Innovation outlined in the CHE QAF. This stage is reached following the successful completion of the accreditation process. Institutions in this phase are undergoing comprehensive institutional change and transformation. Central to the RIVER Model, within this ultimate phase, is a holistic bricoleur change that encompasses both human experience and academic development, as proposed by Dakin (1996). At this juncture, proficiency is exhibited in the transition from action to essence. Institutions’ perspectives during this stage revolve around fostering a culture of quality, rather than solely focusing on quality systems. goals.

This aligns with the definition of quality outlined in (ISO 21001, 2018)³⁹ as “the degree to which a set of inherent characteristics of an object fulfils requirements.” The key emphasis lies on the term “inherent,” indicating pre-existing qualities. Consequently, factors like price and delivery are not inherent quality characteristics of a product; however, they may pertain to a service, being intrinsic rather than externally assigned. This underscores quality as an attribute inherent to the institution and its systems, rather

38 The term “Accreditation,” as currently employed, will undergo a shift in meaning once the Institutional Audit System is implemented. Consequently, a new fitting term is anticipated to complement the revamped system.

39 ISO 21001 is an internationally recognised quality management system that is also adopted as South African National Standards (SANS) 21001. It falls under the Standards Act no. 24 of 1945 and operates as a public entity under the Standards Act no. 8 of 2008 (<https://www.gov.za/> & <https://www.sabs.co.za/>).

than solely dependent on alignment with external quality assurance bodies like CHE.

The transformative process at this level propels institutions towards a culture of quality, fostering an environment conducive to innovation. Innovation becomes the driving force behind activities within PTIs, propelling TET beyond conventional touchstones toward revolutionary systems and practices in higher education (Dames 2021).

Attaining this level of proficiency enables the exploration of contextual education, enriched by African philosophy. African philosophy of education emphasises communal values, the importance of interconnectedness (*Ubuntu*), and indigenous knowledge systems (Mzondi 2022), which contrast with the individualism found in many Western educational models. Drawing from Africans' sociocultural experiences, this philosophy offers a robust framework for designing culturally relevant and locally grounded educational systems. For instance, African philosophy supports the integration of oral traditions, community involvement, and indigenous problem-solving methods into both theory and practice, enhancing the relevance and effectiveness of education across the continent (Horsthemke 2017) (Dames 2021).

Conclusion

PTIs' mission is to pursue God's mission in a relevant and impactful way to their communities. Theology is a contextual and nuanced field and must be approached both academically and spiritually. To excel academically, models such as the RIVER Model of change are suggested, aligning shared mission with CHE policy requirements, while still pursuing the Church's missional goals. However, to fulfil the spiritual aspect of the mission of God, a more immersive approach is required. Theology is not just taught but also caught – a striving to infuse it with love and faithfulness is an ideal that its subjects require, for a truly transformative experience.

To conclude, the authors offer that the goal should be to *recognise* emerging opportunities, *imagine* innovative strategies, *visualise* new systems, encourage the need for new *expertise*, and lead a *revolution* in how theological education and training are provided in the way the Church participates

in academia and research.⁴⁰ The River Model of change advocates for a scholarly approach that is faithful and responsible, integrating the rigorous standards of higher education with the institution's own IQA system, presenting an African transformative and critically reflexive approach to change.

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40 The italicised words indicate the relationship with the RIVER Model of Change model.

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