THE SOUTH AFRICAN QUALIFICATIONS AUTHORITY
Custodian of the National Qualifications Framework
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The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) is a statutory body established through an Act of Parliament and is based in Pretoria, South Africa. SAQA is the custodian of the South African National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and oversees the further development and implementation of the NQF.

SAQA was established in 1995 through the SAQA Act which was also the first piece of post-apartheid education and training legislation to be passed in a democratic South Africa. The SAQA Act was subsequently replaced by the NQF Act in 2008 which further strengthened the role of SAQA, while introducing innovative changes to the original design of the NQF.

Since SAQA’s establishment the organisation has served as a model statutory body with impeccable financial and operational management – in 2011 SAQA received its 14th successive unqualified audit since its inception from the Auditor General. Over the years SAQA has come to the fore as an important intellectual resource to the country, but also to the Southern African region, Africa and even further afield. SAQA is internationally recognised as a contributor to the development of qualifications systems and is often called upon to share the South African experience and offer expert advice.

SAQA has been effectively led by its first Chief Executive Officer, Samuel Isaacs, since 1998. As the longest standing CEO of a qualifications authority in the world, Mr. Isaacs retires in 2012, and will be succeeded by Mr. Joe Samuels who has served as the Deputy CEO since 2005. The SAQA Board is appointed by the Minister of Higher Education and Training and provides strategic direction to SAQA. The current Chairperson of the SAQA Board is Mr. J.J. Njeke. Previous chairpersons include Prof. Shirley Walters, Prof. Mokobung Nkomo, Mr. David Adler and Mr. Samuel Isaacs.

SAQA has a staff complement of 150 people organised in 12 directorates, each of which is led by a Director. SAQA has been able to attract talented and experienced individuals into several key positions. Strategic support functions for Human Resources, Informational Technology and Finances are well developed and make an important contribution to the effectiveness of the organisation.

SAQA’s main areas of responsibility include the registration of qualifications and professional designations on the NQF, the recognition of professional bodies, the management of information of the education and training system in respect of qualifications and learner achievements, the development of a national career development and advice service (a Higher Education and Training Ministerial flagship project), as well as the evaluation of foreign qualifications.
The primary purpose of the work of SAQA, as it oversees the further development and implementation of the NQF, is to serve the many learners that are in the South African education and training system. In a country where the system historically favoured a few at the expense of the many, there is much to be done to redress imbalances and to ensure that qualifications are accessible to all levels of society. At the same time it is important to ensure that international benchmarking takes place to ensure global competitiveness and as a result, also the recognition of South African qualifications abroad.

Mandated by Parliament, SAQA through the NQF has introduced far-ranging reforms in the South African education and training system since 1995. Notably all providers, be they public or private, are now required to meet the same minimum standards. All formal education and training programmes must be based on quality qualifications registered on the NQF. International providers and the qualifications they offer must meet the same requirements as local providers. Through these and several other initiatives SAQA works to eradicate the exploitation of learners by unscrupulous providers (also referred to as degree mills), while also ensuring that qualifications meet the needs of society, including industry and employers. While these reforms have been based on the most recent international trends, the most important driver has been the extent to which the learner benefits from the changes.

SAQA is committed to the development of an NQF that facilitates articulation, recognition, access and redress across education, training and workplace learning; where learners, especially the youth in rural and the poorest of poor communities, are adequately served by the SAQA through its NQF advocacy, qualification and career development and advice services. Much more needs to be done; this is an ongoing priority for SAQA.
QUALITY QUALIFICATIONS

The quality of South African qualifications is a key objective of SAQA. In the increasingly globalised world, qualifications provide a ‘passport’ through which skills and competencies can be recognised and transported. For this reason SAQA has strived to develop the NQF in such a manner that it is internationally comparable – in essence, that we use the same language to describe the skills and competencies of learners as that which is used internationally. With more than 150 qualifications frameworks developing across the world today, notably in key regions of the world, the option to develop and implement an NQF was clearly the right decision taken by the first democratic government in South Africa.

In order to improve the quality of qualifications SAQA requires all formal qualifications to be registered on the NQF. Registration is only possible if the minimum requirements set by SAQA are met. In this regard SAQA works closely with the three Quality Councils responsible for different parts of the South African education and training system: the Council on Higher Education (CHE) for qualifications in the higher education sector; Umalusi for qualifications in adult education, Further Education and Training colleges, private providers and schools; and the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) for workplace-orientated qualifications offered in post-school institutions and/or workplaces.

SAQA also offers a verification service through which the authenticity of a South African qualification can be checked against the records held by SAQA. Confidentiality is maintained in the process based on permission from the individual learner. Increasingly this verification service is being used for the appointment of all public officials.
The work of SAQA is based on partnerships with local, regional and international stakeholders. This collaborative model has served SAQA well since 1995 and has ensured that the NQF has become an integral and sustainable component of the South African education and training system.

SAQA’s partnerships have included amongst others: the establishment of standards generating bodies responsible to develop new qualifications, which were made up of expert stakeholders from the various sectors; close collaboration with the three Quality Councils in a wide range of areas; a joint initiative with the Department of Higher Education and Training to establish a national career advice centre; working with support from the European Union to establish SAQA; joint implementation projects with several Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) to develop workplace qualifications; the establishment of the National Learners’ Records Database (NLRD) with support from the Canadian International Development Agency; long-term research between SAQA and leading universities in South Africa; as well as working with the OECD, the Commonwealth Secretariat, the SADC Secretariat, and UNESCO on a variety of projects.

SAQA has built a reputation as an agency with organising power, that is able to bring together key stakeholders in various sectors, and importantly, that is able to see through the realisation of innovative ideas to the realm of public policy and ultimately, to practice. SAQA’s partners play an integral role in this regard.
Lifelong learning is the underlying conceptual framework wherein the work of SAQA takes place, including the development and implementation of the NQF. Within this framework it is acknowledged that everyone can learn regardless of age, gender or position in society. Learning can take place in formal contexts (structured learning leading to a qualification, e.g. towards a BSc degree), non-formal contexts (structured learning that does not necessarily lead to a qualification, e.g. a counseling course offered over a few days) and informal context (unstructured learning that takes place in a variety of settings, e.g. through a hobby).

When NQFs first developed during the 1980s in countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Britain and France, lifelong learning principles were incorporated into the design. The South African NQF is no exception.

In order to further ground the concept of lifelong learning, SAQA is supporting the University of the Western Cape to offer a continuing education course on the topic. The underlying purpose of the course is to develop ‘leaders for learning’ by providing a thorough understanding of the concept of lifelong learning and qualifications frameworks to middle and senior managers who are directly or indirectly involved in the development of the NQF. The first intake of 30 students includes participants from Hong Kong, Australia, Ethiopia and Botswana. The second intake is planned for 2013.
Qualifications frameworks have become a global phenomenon as they provide a common currency through which qualifications, and by implication, the skills and competencies of individuals, can be recognised. While not all NQFs have the same design or purpose, they all provide a sense of the ‘macro indicators’ of an education and training system. Just as GDP or employment rates are used to measure the development of an economy, so too can NQFs be used to provide an indication of the development of the education and training system.

The development and implementation of the NQF in South Africa is overseen by SAQA in collaboration with a wide range of partners. SAQA is primarily funded by Parliament through the Department of Higher Education and Training. The three Quality Councils are each responsible for their specific sectors. In this regard the NQF has been designed with three sub-frameworks, one for each of the sectors namely; higher education, general and further education and training and trades and occupation. In order to enhance coordination within the NQF system, SAQA convenes an NQF Forum that includes the most senior leaders from each of the organisations involved. The forum meets quarterly and is supported by a smaller committee that comprises the CEOs of SAQA and the Quality Councils.

The NQF is made up of 10 levels described by a set of level descriptors. Different qualifications types are registered on each of the levels as determined by the three Quality Councils. Qualifications registered on the NQF can be offered by any provider that meets the requirements of the Quality Councils. SAQA aims to ensure that articulation and mobility across the different sub-frameworks is taken into account when qualifications are registered on the NQF. The architecture of the South African NQF has changed since 1995 to better suit the South African context, notably by changing from 8 to 10 levels, and by accommodating the three sub-frameworks. SAQA has ensured that the NQF is flexible enough to facilitate the changes, while holding the core design stable to ensure continuity and stability in the system.
PROFESSIONAL BODIES

S AQA is responsible to recognise professional bodies involved in education and training and for the registration of their professional designations on the NQF. This is a relatively new area of responsibility and the rules of engagement have been developed by SAQA in close consultation with the professional body community and the Quality Councils since 2006.

At present SAQA is working with ten professional bodies to refine the policy and criteria, after which the recognition process will commence in the second half of 2012.

The formal inclusion of professional bodies within the NQF is a bold and innovative move that will ensure greater cohesion with the education and training system by coordinating the involvement of these bodies in the development of professional qualifications and the quality assurance of the delivery of the qualifications. Importantly, their inclusion provides important national oversight into employment and skills development trends. Overseas partners are watching the South African developments closely as they recognise the innovation that SAQA is pioneering.
A flagship project of the Ministry of Higher Education and Training is a multi-channel career development and advice service structured to particularly benefit youth especially those in poor and deep rural areas of the country. SAQA has been instrumental in realising this vision through the ‘NQF and Career Advice Helpline’ which constitutes one component of the service that can be accessed by phone, SMS, website, email, letter, or in person. This initiative exploits the influence of diverse media to provide career guidance and advice. Media includes newspapers, radio and the dynamic and ever-expanding social network platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Intermediaries help to provide a network of career advisers.

The service targets students, workers, the unemployed, people with disabilities, and the informal sector. Through the service SAQA provides advice to the public for informed and sound career choices, as well as a way to manage their career paths effectively.

A website, www.careerhelp.org.za, targeted at learners, parents, school-leavers and others interested in careers, is populated with a wealth of valuable information on learning options, skills in demand and financing of studies.

Under the Khetha campaign banner, SAQA broadcasts career guidance advice across the SABC airwaves in nine official South African languages. With the slogan ‘Make the right choice. Decide your future’, the programmes comprise in-depth discussions on various careers and advice on school subject choice, available qualifications and sources of funding. SAQA endeavours seriously to reach the marginalised and deep rural communities.

Career guidance and advice constitutes an integral part of any education and training system. In South Africa a public service of this nature does not exist. SAQA, with the Department of Higher Education and Training, has taken the initiative to realise this vision.
In a country such as South Africa, where many people never had the opportunity to study as a result of repressive laws, there is a great need to now provide opportunities to obtain formal recognition for learning that took place in non-formal and informal environments. To this end SAQA has championed the implementation of the recognition of prior learning (RPL) as part of the development of the NQF. In this regard both policy and guidelines were developed to support providers to establish RPL capacity.

Between 2006 and 2008 SAQA collaborated with the OECD as part of an international study to determine the effectiveness and extent of RPL practices across 22 countries. The study showed that while South Africa had made progress in this area, such progress was limited to ‘islands of good practice’. The exercise gave SAQA the opportunity to benchmark South African RPL practices against those of counterparts in countries such as Australia, Canada, Denmark, the United Kingdom, Mexico and Austria.

More recently SAQA has undertaken a number of RPL-related initiatives, including hosting a national RPL conference in 2010, and a long-term research project that is considering RPL as a specialised pedagogy. An RPL Working Document was developed during the 2010 conference and now forms an important reference point for further actions to be taken by SAQA and other roleplayers. Taking RPL to scale is a key challenge in South Africa (as it is in many other countries). SAQA is committed to taking on this challenge and will be working closely with a Ministerial RPL Task Team during 2012.
Research forms the basis for SAQA’s activities and has enabled the organisation to continuously improve the NQF and assess its impact. In this regard SAQA has come to understand the NQF as a relational and transformative device that influences, and is influenced by, other factors within the education and training system.

SAQA advises the Minister of Higher Education and Training on NQF-related matters. In this regard SAQA has on numerous occasions provided well researched and credible reports to the Minister and Department.

Aware of the need for intellectual capital and skills flow within a communicative, coordinating and collaborative framework, SAQA has adopted a research partnership model. Long-term research projects concentrate on policy development issues such as integration of academic and vocational knowledge, and articulation in learning pathways, whilst shorter-term initiatives analyse aspects such as learner results and quality assurance models. Leading tertiary institutions work with SAQA to conduct research on various aspects of education, training and development, from RPL practices, further education and training (FET) lecturers and change-oriented learning to sustainability practices, specialised communities of practice, and measuring the impact of the NQF. The value of SAQA's partnerships with education institutions is evident in the quality of research generated and the impact that the research findings are making within the education and training system.

An important feature of SAQA’s research model is the focus on research that enables policy development which in turn is implemented as best practice. For this reason the research projects are very focused on aspects related to the NQF which can then be considered and incorporated into new policy processes. Examples include the development of policy and guidelines for RPL, professional bodies and also the level descriptors for the NQF.

SAQA has also worked extensively with international partners to conduct research in areas of mutual interest. Examples include the recognition of teacher qualifications in the Commonwealth, RPL (with the OECD), and transnational qualifications frameworks (with the European Training Foundation).

In order to identify key areas of future research SAQA regularly hosts seminars and conferences wherein all stakeholders participate. The intention is to share information on existing research, but also to encourage collaboration and sharing of resources between institutions where possible. SAQA always encourages wide participation from all institutions.
SAQA’s foresight and position as thought leader manifested early in its history through the creation of the widely acclaimed National Learners’ Records Database (NLRD). Highly specialised, but multifaceted to meet the needs of various users, the NLRD contains records of nearly 11 million learners with details of their achievements. The NLRD also contains information of quality assurance bodies, their accredited providers, assessors, and moderating bodies.

SAQA has been working with the Council on Higher Education to gather information that relates to private higher education institutions in higher education so that this data can also be uploaded to the NLRD.

The NLRD will soon also contain information that relates to professional bodies and professional designations. As a relational database, the NLRD is able to draw the linkages between qualifications, providers, quality assurance bodies, and now also professional bodies. This will enable SAQA to conduct more comprehensive analyses of trends within the education and training system, which in turn, will enable better future planning.

The NLRD is poised to grow in reach and influence in the years to come, with ongoing emphasis on enhancing accuracy and quality of data. Several countries have expressed an interest in learning more about the NLRD and visit SAQA on a regular basis.
SAQA's global footprint has grown since 1995 as several requests for support have been received over the years. SAQA's main focus is SADC, and in this regard the organisation has played a critical role in developing the SADC regional qualifications framework, as well as piloting a SADC qualifications portal. The SADC framework is intended to contribute to the creation of a continental qualifications framework for mutual recognition of degrees and qualifications in higher education and vocational education and training.

Technical support is also offered to specific countries and regions on request. Recent examples include Ethiopia, Seychelles and Tanzania.

Study visits to SAQA are numerous as SAQA has hosted countries from all over the world. In many instances the same countries visit SAQA on two or three occasions.

SAQA was commissioned to research teacher qualifications in the 53 Commonwealth member states, as a base for the compilation of a qualifications comparability table. The findings of the research has informed the decisions of the Commonwealth Ministers of Education and has also provided a useful basis for the ongoing work on professional standards for teachers within the Commonwealth.

For the Virtual University of Small States of the Commonwealth, SAQA conceptualised and developed the Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF), a reference system that links national qualifications systems and frameworks in different small states and allows worker mobility among states.
SQA’s work touches not only the citizens of South Africa, but also the increasing number of people that enter or return to South Africa in the hope of jobs and brighter prospects for their families. They are assisted to have qualifications obtained outside the Republic of South Africa evaluated, as a first step towards securing employment. The service extends to South Africans that studied abroad and foreign professionals wishing to settle in South Africa.

SAQA compares foreign qualifications with local qualifications registered on the NQF and then offers advice on the corresponding level of the foreign qualification. This information is used by the applicants to apply for work permits as well as for further study. In this area SAQA evaluates qualifications originating from more than 100 countries on five continents and across a wide spectrum of disciplines, from arts and culture to engineering and technology. At present SAQA receives more than 20,000 applications per year. An online application system enables access from outside of South Africa and is currently utilised by close to 40% of applicants.

SAQA also contributes to the global network of credential evaluation agencies, in particular with regard to the location of the service within the NQF environment in South Africa.
REACHING THE MARGINALISED

Rural and poor communities constitute a large portion of the South African population. In order for these communities to benefit from the NQF, SAQA has actively reached out to rural areas through regional radio broadcasts and joint workshops and exhibitions such as the Mandela Day Career Guidance Festival. The NQF and Career Advice Helpline was designed to give access to these marginalised communities through cost effective alternatives with preferably no cost to the learners.

Several RPL initiatives in the Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA) environment have also targeted rural communities, notably in the construction, mining and insurance sectors, and SAQA has played a supportive role where appropriate.

The Kha Ri Gude adult literacy campaign of the Department of Basic Education is also actively supported by SAQA through the quality assurance of assessment. It is expected that this will be handed over to Umalusi in due course.

As an employer SAQA has consistently employed young and unemployed people on learnerships and as interns. These experiences have enabled them to find permanent employment, in many cases, at SAQA itself.
COMMUNICATION AND ADVOCACY

SAQA promotes and monitors understanding of the NQF value proposition through communication and advocacy at exhibitions and public forums, and through the NQF and Career Advice Helpline. The purpose of communication and advocacy is to position the NQF as ‘valued and trusted pathfinder’ in the journey of lifelong learning among existing stakeholders and to convey the message to prospective audiences.

NQF ambassadors have been appointed and trained within SAQA, the Quality Councils and the Department of Higher Education and Training. These NQF ambassadors fulfil an important role in communicating the NQF and its benefits to learners in South Africa.
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