

Occupation qualifications in the Seychelles and South Africa: a critical reflection on progress to date¹

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Abstract

We have prepared this paper as four practitioners located in two African qualifications authorities that have collaborated in the area of qualifications framework development since 2004. In the paper, we give an overview of the development of occupationally-directed qualifications in the two countries to date, recognising that in the Seychelles a strong emphasis is being placed on a competency-based approach, while in South Africa an outcomes-based approach has been favoured. Comparing the two approaches, the current debates in each country and recognising that significant contextual differences exist between the Seychelles and South Africa we attempt to identify common challenges faced in the two countries as well as possible ways in which such challenges can be addressed.

Introduction

There is little doubt that the Seychelles and South Africa have little in common. The Seychelles is a small island state with a population of 84,000, while South Africa is a large developing country with a population of more than 50 million. The Seychelles has no tertiary institutions, while South Africa has more than twenty well established and large universities, with student numbers alone making up more than the complete population of the Seychelles. Despite these significant differences both countries have opted to develop national qualifications framework since the 1990s, and have collaborated on this matter since 2003.

In the case of South Africa, the decision to implement an NQF was strongly influenced by similar developments in Australia, New Zealand, Scotland, Ireland and England in the late 1990s. The opportunity for a radical shift from the education and training model inherited from the apartheid regime presented itself in 1994 when the ANC government came to power. The subsequent development and implementation of a unified NQF for all sectors and levels of the system, strongly influenced by a particular form of outcomes-based education, was overseen by the South African Qualifications Authority from 1997, after the act was passed in 1995. To date the implementation of the NQF has not been without controversy, accompanied by a continued and drawn-out review process, seemingly only coming to an end in October 2007 as this paper is being prepared. As part of the end of the review, it has been proposed that occupationally-directed qualifications be recognised as distinct, requiring a specific approach to qualifications design and delivery.

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In the case of the Seychelles the decision to develop an NQF was also influenced from abroad, but in this case the influence was much closer and more difficult to ignore. By 2003 most member states of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) had embarked on NQF development, with South Africa, Mauritius and Namibia furthest advanced. In addition the region made it clear that a regional qualifications framework would be developed with increasing political support. Recognising the potential benefits of having its own NQF as early as 1999, the Seychelles embarked on a well-planned and gradual plan of action. By 2005 the Act was promulgated, by 2006 the Seychelles Qualifications Authority (SQA) had started developing regulations and policies for the NQF (see SAQA 2007, 2007b and 2007c). Concurrently, with support from Canada, a process was initiated to develop local capacity in competency-based curriculum development. Similar to the strong influence of outcomes-based education in the early years of the development of the South African NQF, good progress with the competency-based initiative made a significant impact on the development of the NQF in the Seychelles.

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on these developments in the two countries from the perspective of a practitioner. At the outset we acknowledge that we are located within the respective governments, knowing that we cannot purport to be completely unbiased in what we say. Despite this, we realise that in presenting this case study we will be able to contribute to the broader debate on qualifications frameworks, in particular the design of occupational qualifications within these frameworks, as we create an opportunity for others to note the challenges we have faced, as well as the ways in which these challenges have been addressed.

The paper is comprised of three sections. The first two sections focus on qualifications framework development, including the design of occupational qualifications, in the Seychelles and South Africa respectively. The third section identifies some of the unique and common challenges faced in developing occupational qualifications in the two countries.

Occupational qualifications in the Seychelles

The idea of an NQF for Seychelles surfaced in the late 1990s in the then Ministry of Social Affairs and Manpower Development, the Ministry responsible for human resource development and manpower co-ordination in Seychelles. Influenced by the development of frameworks in the SADC region and across the Commonwealth, and belabouring the skills shortage in the country and the mismatch between the qualifications offered locally and the needs of the workplace, some leading officials saw in this a vehicle for the amelioration of the situation. With their views converging with that of government ministers, they received a ready ear from the National Vocational Training Board (NVTB), the body which had decision-making powers about vocational education and training affairs in the country, and the NQF became government policy.

The rationale for this policy was articulated by the Manpower Division in 1999 to ensure comprehensiveness in the recognition of learning and qualifications attained in the country, to promote an integrated approach to education and training, increased articulation of learning programmes and mobility of learners within a coherent and integrated learning system, and to ensure a qualitative education and training system. In addition the policy offered a consistent framework of principles and certification which would allow learners to clearly link credits into a meaningful learning mainstream pathway, provide entry to appropriate levels of education and

training for all prospective learners in a manner which facilitates progression, and enable learners to transfer their credits from one education and training system to another. Even at this stage it was agreed that the policy would allow for qualifications based on competency standards linked to workplace requirements and with a specific focus on promoting the development of competency based career paths and the qualifications required to perform functions at different levels (Ministry of Social Affairs and Manpower Development 1999).

With the lack of expertise to undertake the tasks leading to an NQF, the government sought assistance from abroad to conduct a study on how and in what stages the NQF could be developed. Corneels Jafta from Namibia was entrusted with the task. Jafta's report was a seminal event in the progress towards a Seychelles NQF (Jafta 1999). It firstly gave confidence to the NVTB and, by consequence the government, that the Seychelles could move towards the NQF, and that it would serve to improve the existing situation. While it made recommendations on several issues that would need to be addressed along the way (e.g. the need to engage industry and business in the NQF, train standards setters, integrate education and training, achieve parity of esteem for local qualifications, and move towards an outcomes-based system) the immediate need to appoint a National Working Party to develop the concept NQF and draft legislation for an authoritative body to develop and implement the NQF were the most significant recommendations in the short term. Secondly the report also provided a road map which was to underpin the efforts of the NQF Working Group as well the SQA when that eventually became a reality in 2006. However, it was to be left to the nascent SQA several years down the line to develop the concept NQF immediately after its creation.

On the basis of the recommendations from the report, the Vice President appointed a Working Group in September 2000 responsible to the National Vocational Training Board with the mandate to develop the concept of the National Qualifications Framework, including draft legislation. The Working Group was also tasked to make recommendations for the establishment of National Qualifications Authority to assess and award national qualifications according to set standards (Michel 2000). The Working Group subsequently developed a qualifications map and the legislation for a National Qualifications Authority.

Early after 2000 the Canadian government began the PRIMTAF (*Programme de renforcement institutionnel en matiere technologique en Afrique francophone*) project to develop local capacity in competency-based curriculum development. From its inception the project was geared towards the development of occupational-based training programmes. This was in response to a lacuna which existed locally. A few curriculum developers were *au fait* with the DACUM process of developing curriculum, but this had never taken root and there was a marked preference locally for importing programmes, especially from such bodies as City and Guilds and Pittman. There was an obvious economic dimension to the project as the Ministry sought to curb its foreign exchange expenditure.

As part of the project, the facilitators and their local counterparts from the post-secondary education and training institutions developed two trial courses using the competency-based approach (CBA). As the curriculum developers approached the final stages of the course development the question as of where to position the courses on the post-secondary education landscape reared its head. Prior to this point in time, curriculum developers were approximating the level of their courses, and it was already clear that we lacked the criteria to guide as to what should amount to a diploma or certificate. It was against this background that money was secured from the Canadian government in 2002 to extend the initial project to cover the

development of a sub framework, the post-secondary education and training sub-framework or PSETF, including the development of a set of policies, guidelines, instruments, and processes required for the coordinated and rigorous design, organization, implementation and evaluation of educational and training activities at post-secondary level.

To provide a structure for the management of the CBA and PSETF, the Ministry of Education in 2003 created the FED section. This was important on several levels. Officers of the FED had been involved in the Working group of 2000, and were keen to revive the NQF idea. Indeed they had championed such a cause in the National Education Conference of 2003. This was the first time a government structure had been put in place to develop a framework, albeit a sub framework and the Ministry of Education had taken the lead. To build capacity for the PSETF, consultancies facilitated by the Canadians and study tours in South Africa and Mauritius enabled the FED officers to strengthen their competence in matters NQF related, enabling both the Ministry and the Government to have greater confidence in local capacity to spearhead the development of an NQF. By 2005 when the project ended proposals for accreditation, certification, validation and curriculum design had been developed as part of the PSETF.

The FED section was instrumental in persuading the Minister of Education to resurrect the NQF project. In the budget address for 2005 the Vice President formally underlined the commitment of the government to a National Qualifications Authority (Michel 2004):

Another aspect of the reforms will be the establishment of a policy and legal framework for the development, assessment and award of national qualifications according to set standards. The National Qualifications Framework will help in the creation of a more integrated education and training system. The framework will be the responsibility of a new body, the Seychelles Qualifications Authority which will be set up in 2005.

In the same speech the Vice President endorsed the competency-based approach to curriculum development and announced that henceforth all local programmes were to be developed using this approach.

The National Education Conference of 2003 was dedicated to the competency-based approach to curriculum development and the PSETF. One of the outcomes was a recommendation for the Ministry of Education and Youth to seriously consider the adoption of the competency-Based Approach (CBA) for curriculum development and implementation (Ministry of Education and Youth 2003). There was consensus that this approach was appropriate since it provides for the all-round development of the person, engages the labour market at critical junctures, and makes for training which is job specific, highly flexible and student-centred. Its systematic approach to course development, inclusive of steps to involve the labour market, had been shown in the development of the two trial programmes of Tour Guiding and Environmental Health Officer. Feedback from industry indicated increased satisfaction with the performance of the graduates. The CBA model addressed the strongest indictment of the current practices; that of the relevance of training. By the time the project ended in 2005 enough capacity had been built for the task of curriculum transformation to be confidently undertaken in the post-secondary institutions. The Lead Curriculum Development Group managed by the FED section could confidently begin the review of all local programmes, a task which is now at the half way stage.

In matters to do with the CBA and the framework, the issue of confidence cannot be overemphasized. In his opening address at the 2006 National Conference on the Framework, the SQA Executive Director emphasized that the adoption of the CBA was not only

...being driven by economic imperatives [but was] also a national confidence building initiative. This ties in with the project for a national qualifications framework, since this is, in the first instance, a framework of national or local qualifications. The extent that the CBA is successful will therefore be an important barometer for the success of the national qualifications framework (Domingue 2006:3).

Corneels Jafta had also noted in 1999 that

If the people of Seychelles continue to perceive the national qualifications to be inferior to or less desirable than foreign qualifications, then the effort and expense of establishing a National Qualifications Framework would be wasted." (Jafta 1999:24)

At the end of the day, it was commonly accepted that a successful national qualifications framework would derive from a successful CBA drive, provided that the local product gained credibility.

To date the relationship between the CBA programme development and the NQF has been a symbiotic one. They have reinforced each other. The CBA drive threw into relief the need for an NQF. The systematic development of programmes brought with it the need to rationalize the landscape of qualifications. The CBA methodology used has led to

...the identification of the pressing need for the programmes to articulate with other programmes, both vertically and horizontally. This has underscored the need for adequate framework regulations and guidelines, the absence of which will greatly undermine the wholesale (CBA) revision that is now starting to take place in some institutions. (Domingue 2006:3)

Of note is that in Seychelles the CBA review is also moving into secondary education.

In the larger context where the traditional British type of qualifications are still strongly influencing education and training in the Seychelles (e.g. IGCSEs, "A" Levels, City and Guilds), and practices described in the draft policy of Recognition of Foreign Qualifications (SQA 2007c) look askance to international best practice within the field, the vocationally oriented qualification types on the Qualifications Map drawn up by the SQA derive their characteristic mainly from the application of the CBA. The development of competencies using the CBA has provided the model from which unit standards can be developed, and this is made explicit in the Seychelles Qualifications Authority's draft policy-guideline on standards setting (SQA 2007b). In the policy-guidelines of the developing Recognition of Prior Learning policy (RPL), the CBA approach to assessment is also apparent (SQA 2007e). The occupational orientation of the developing Seychelles NQF is due, in large part, to the influence that the CBA has had on the SQA secretariat, the Technical Support Group of the SQA and other local consultants who have been engaged to assist in the development of the framework. The CBA model of placing stakeholders at the heart of the enterprise is being applied in the development of a communications strategy that should ensure that regulations and policy-guidelines for certification,

accreditation of institutions and validation of programmes will secure legitimacy. In a sense therefore the CBA is a pillar of the developing Seychelles NQF.

On the other hand, NQF policy-guidelines and regulations will serve to give a structure for the management of the CBA drive in the public post-secondary institutions. Given the absence of a higher education sector, and the existence of what is virtually a sub framework in the form of the National Curriculum for Schools, the post secondary landscape in Seychelles is the area where the framework will have the most impact. It is therefore more within the context of the educational trajectory at that particular level that the NQF is situating itself.

Occupational qualifications in South Africa

In contrast to the Seychelles experience, the conception, gestation and birth of the South African NQF happened in the context of a turbulent South Africa. For years the apartheid state had deliberately sought to frustrate the education and training aspirations of its majority non-white population. Legislation like “Job Reservation” meant that only white workers in industrial settings could access formal training and certification in particular job types. Workplace exigencies however were putting increasing pressure on employers to make use of black labour in reserved areas without acknowledging them and hence creating a hugely disproportionate impact on company bottom lines and profitability due to the meagre wages they were able to offer workers.

It is hardly surprising therefore that the origins of the South African NQF can be traced back to the labour movement of the 1970s. With workers caught-up in a spiral of non-recognition of their informally gained competencies and the consequentially low wages, it became almost axiomatic in labour circles that training and certification was the route to improved wages. It was with this background that the National Union of Mineworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) sponsored a research group of workers and union officials to develop a stance on training. The recommendations of the group highlighted the need for basic education as well as portability of qualifications. Formal adoption of the NUMSA recommendations by Congress of South African Trade Unions followed in July 1991. The rest, as might be said, is history.

Concurrent with the pressure from the labour movement there was an increasingly shrill demand for change in education, spearheaded by the non-governmental education sector. Protests was epitomised by the Soweto student uprising of 1976, which was followed by nation-wide student protests. By the 1980s the entire education system had been discredited and rejected:

Non-governmental education sector resistance resulted eventually in the formation of the National Education Policy Initiative (NEPI), which set about developing proposals for the restructuring of the formal education system. Drawing on discussions with a wide range of interested parties within the democratic alliance, the NEPI reports and framework, published in 1992, were premised upon the principles of non-racism, non-sexism, democracy and redress, and the need for a non-racial unitary system of education and training.

On accession to power in 1994, the ANC-led government was, understandably, under tremendous pressure to reform a disparate and unequal education and training system. New policy-makers attempted to put in place a system that would facilitate

access, mobility and recognition of learning, particularly for those individuals who had been prevented from accessing formal education and training under the previous regime. An NQF model that would incorporate every sector and level of education and training was proposed. All stakeholders, including providers of education and training, employers, organized labour and other interested parties were therefore involved in the conceptualization of the South African NQF.

The negotiated nature of the NQF's architecture created a political will for successful implementation because it seemed to address all that was "bad" in the previous system and was therefore "good". This is not to say there were no dissenting voices. Criticism however seems to have been somewhat muted in the context of a drive for transformation of the Education and Training landscape. Moreover there was mounting evidence from the likes of New Zealand, Australia and the United Kingdom that qualifications frameworks were the way forward. Indeed the technical and conceptual development of the South African NQF drew heavily on the developments in these countries. Two aspects would however make the South African NQF unique: the extent to which it would assume the burden of social and political transformation in the post-apartheid world; and similarly the extent to which a strong influence from the dominant outcomes-based discourse was assimilated.

The legislative framework that was to enable the establishment of the NQF was promulgated in 1995 as the SAQA Act. It created the South African Qualifications Authority which was charged with the establishment and implementation oversight of the NQF. SAQA started its work in 1998. It is important to note here that, although SAQA was established as a semi-autonomous body, it exercised its mandate under the watchful eye of the Ministers of Education and Labour. The significance of this was to become apparent in the tensions that began to appear during NQF implementation in the years that followed. The lack of a shared vision for the NQF between the two Departments was to result in an early review of implementation, a process set in motion in 2001 and perhaps only now nearing finalization.

A further point of interest is the fact that for the first five years of the NQF, SAQA was almost wholly donor funded, most notably by the European Union, which for what was to be a critical implementing body for a policy thought to be central to government thinking remains inexplicable; as much was acknowledged in the review that followed.

Despite the uncertain policy environment, created in part by the drawn out review process and contestation regarding the mandates of other NQF implementing agencies, the South African Qualifications Authority continues to fulfill its mandate. Valuable lessons have been learned along the way. In what is intended to be an integrated NQF the challenge of occupational qualifications remains. Although there is not a universally accepted definition of what they are, there is a broad understanding that occupational qualifications are a coherent mix of both practical skills gained in the workplace (or simulation) and underpinning theoretical knowledge. The integration of skills and knowledge should result in outcomes that talk to the purpose of the qualification. SAQA regulations stipulate that qualifications have *fundamental*, *core* and *elective* components. In the General Education and Training band and the Further Education and Training band (levels 1-4 of an 8 level framework), the fundamental component of qualifications is largely prescribed and focuses on communication (language) skills and Mathematical skills. Occupational competencies are addressed in the rest of the qualification.

The South African NQF, at least in its present unified form, does not make a distinction between different types of qualifications, and does therefore not include

occupational qualifications in the conventional sense. Despite this lack of formal differentiation a spontaneous gravitation towards three 'types' of qualifications has occurred: academic (mainly in higher education), vocational (providing learners with a combination of both academic content and simulated workplace experience) and occupational (directly situated in the workplace context and mostly delivered through learnerships and apprenticeships). Largely as a result of this evolution of the South African NQF three sub-frameworks are under development for each of the three sectors, including a sub-framework for occupational qualifications. In each case a more context-appropriate approach to qualification design and quality assurance has been suggested, although still within the framework of a broad national approach overseen by SAQA.

In particular it is expected that the problematic of outcome statements will also be addressed within each of the three sub-frameworks. In the occupational sub-framework the fundamental component looks set to be abandoned, while the delivery mode will probably favour the apprenticeship model. National trade testing will be reconsidered and trades will be rationalized. As with the two other sub-frameworks, the proposed sub-framework for occupations will also have its own set of level descriptors, and consists of an overarching "Organising Framework for Occupations" (OFO). Work on the OFO is currently being undertaken by the South African Department of Labour, and includes additional information that will be useful for research purposes. It is envisaged that learnerships will only be registered against occupations in the OFO. Linked to the proposed OFO is a curriculum model that makes it possible to structure the learning requirements for a particular occupation in terms of the three distinct modes of learning (knowledge and theory acquisition, development of practical skills and workplace experience) (see Keevy and Blom 2007).

Challenges in designing occupational qualifications

In a recent report produced by the SQA the following viewpoint was advanced:

The work and orientation of the SQA thus far is *strongly underlain with an occupational bias*. While this is not necessarily a bad thing in that the main thrust of our framework is towards the post-secondary landscape, we need to **be aware of this** and recognize its limits. While this may be an overcorrection which arises from a felt need for our courses to be relevant to the world of work and the strong influence of the CBA movement, there is the danger that we can tend to 'over occupationalize' courses, for example in the higher education and training band. (SQA 2007:2, emphasis added)

In Seychelles the recent pronouncement of government to set up a foundation to establish a university has thrown into relief the need to have an NQF that is able to accommodate, even facilitate, such developments in the qualifications landscape. The time is propitious and presents the SQA with an important and probably unique opportunity to align developments at the tertiary level within the bounds of the developing NQF. The occasion presents a contrast with the experience of first and even second generation NQFs, and as such the developments in Seychelles will be of special significance in the long term study of NQFs.

What is evident is that the issue of establishing comparability and parity of esteem between qualifications within different components of the education and training system is not by any means particular only to the Seychelles NQF. It is as true in

South Africa as it is Seychelles and elsewhere that the “way in which society recognizes, rewards and measures learning achievement is through qualifications. It is society that provides the ultimate validation of qualifications and accords respect to the bearer.” (Mehl 2004:22). In Seychelles the NQF is meant to be instrument through which to overcome the disparity of esteem between local and the foreign qualifications, while improved comparability between occupational and academic qualifications is also of importance. In South Africa the NQF has purposed to address the historically entrenched differences between education and training, while the improved comparability of qualifications offered by historically disadvantaged institutions has also been important.

In the South African case the attempt to improve parity of esteem was always an ambitious project, particularly in addition to the weight of the transformation agenda. The challenges faced in South Africa since the late 1990s do however provide an important lens through which the shift to three sub-frameworks can be viewed and guided, in particular in placing and emphasis on “much more deliberate work to align the sub-sectors of the system (and the need to reconcile) opposing epistemologies that are characteristic of discipline-based and workplace-based learning” (Keivy & Blom 2007:11).

In this enterprise, Seychelles will have to tread with care cognizant of the experience of countries like South Africa. Colonial legacies die hard. In the first instance there has been in the Seychelles “a very strong distinction drawn by Seychelles institutions between education on the one hand and training and development on the other” (Jafta 1999:24). Traditionally education and training has been, and remains, under separate ministries. Human resource development, for a short while under the Ministry of Education, has recently been placed under the Ministry of Employment, thus detracting from the objective of integration. This strong distinction has militated against the integration of education and training and will surely militate against the integration that the developing NQF seeks to achieve. The continuing strong perception in the country that white collar jobs are the best things under the sun means that parity of esteem, and quite likely integration, may only be attained after a protracted and complex struggle. The concomitant challenge in the Seychelles is the “very strong preference for and belief in foreign qualifications as opposed to national qualifications, and in particular academic qualifications” (Jafta 1999:24). This overvaluing of external certification, especially the ‘O’ and ‘A’ levels, have played no small a part in leading to the current manpower shortages. On the job market a general education qualification such as the ‘A’ levels have been favoured above occupational qualification holders even when such graduates have been expressly prepared for the career at hand. For historical reasons the ‘A’ levels have been posited at the post-secondary level and continues to act as a magnet, pulling away the best students, significantly weakening the occupational qualifications in terms of cohort performance, and leaving these qualifications with the taint of being second best.

Concluding comments

Early data from studies conducted in the Seychelles regarding the initial CBA courses suggest that there is increasing acceptance by industry that the Seychellois are able to develop occupational qualifications. The framework, from the point of view of the SQA and its supporters, should increase this confidence as the intention is to use it as the tide which will lift not just the occupational qualifications (mainly CBA), but also the other more academic based courses. Whether this will indeed happen is

too early to say. What is clear at the moment is that there are challenges which the CBA will itself need to overcome if it is to become a standard that industry will accept without qualms. This includes resistance from within the teaching profession, a reticence from industry to engage in the task of course development especially in the absence of pull factors other than the promise of better graduates, the lack of resources both human and material to underpin the new student-centred approaches, and the weaknesses of existing support structures to give facilitators confidence that they will be assisted in the delivery of competencies written in the competency-based approach format when in moments of doubt. There are some echoes here of the situation in South Africa where teachers have struggled both with the interpretation of unit standards and their transmission to learners in the classroom situation.

In the Seychelles, it is the occupational qualifications through the CBA which have been driver of the NQF, and the intention is for the NQF to strengthen such qualifications. In South Africa the NQF was superimposed on a system of education and training, and not built, according to Paula Ensor, from existing qualifications in use (Ensor 2003). Little more than ten years after the wholesale changes brought about by the SANQF, it is clear that the

...relationship between qualifications required for the world of work (trades, occupations and professions) and the National Qualifications Framework...can best be described as uneasy. While labour market players who participated in the evolution of the NQF always worked with one goal in mind – the NQF as a framework for all kinds of learning – the reality has been quite different. Many of the structures and processes that support the NQF work against the uptake of such qualifications on the NQF. (Keevy & Blom 2007:10)

From our vantage point as practitioners in Seychelles and South Africa, as we have tried to outline in this paper, it is evident that the development of occupational qualifications can be greatly facilitated by qualifications frameworks. More importantly, we want to emphasise that qualifications frameworks are not panaceas that automatically address the various challenges and constraints faced in developing occupational qualifications; on the contrary, the often ambitious, if not overly ambitious, objectives of qualifications frameworks often lead to a form of “mission drift” where the emphasis on designing appropriate occupational qualifications become lost in the many broader issues at stake. Keeping this strong caveat in mind we would encourage countries considering developing occupational qualifications within qualifications frameworks that simplicity, incrementalism and strong local involvement should remain the cornerstones of occupational qualification development, as noted by someone that has been both an international driver and, more recently, a strong critic, of qualifications framework development.

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