Promoting Genuine Qualifications in Africa through Effective Verification

In recent weeks South Africa’s headlines have focused on numerous cases of qualifications fraud, a trend that studies and reports reflect as a growing concern in the education and training landscape the world over.

In a bid to combat qualifications fraud and promote genuine qualifications in Africa through effective verification, the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) hosted a two-day seminar at the University of Pretoria attended by 13 African nations from 24-25 November 2014.

This ground-breaking event was supported by the South African government and UNESCO with the objective of addressing challenges around the verification of foreign qualifications by creating a collaborative, inter-country network so that fraudulent practices can be identified, countered and the integrity of education systems upheld.

In his opening address, Mr Ghaleeb Jeppie, Chief Director of International Relations at the Department of Higher Education and Training reflected on the strides South Africa has made in 20 years of democracy, but said that there were still many challenges to be addressed.

“The Minister of Higher Education and Training is deeply concerned about the growing incidence of academic fraud. For the integrity of our education system to be at peril of losing its credibility through fraudulent activities is a matter that needs to be dealt with at the highest levels. It is pleasing to see a closer partnering of law enforcement agencies in this matter, along with tougher action and prosecution for people who falsify and misrepresent their qualifications. South Africa’s Public Service is also taking great strides in ensuring that education fraudsters are disqualified from working in the public sector again, and here SAQA plays an important role in providing verification services on job applicants.

“We realise that this is not a trend unique to South Africa or Africa for that matter, and that even countries such as Germany faced the same challenge when its Minister of Education was found to have falsified qualifications two years ago. But the fact that it happens all over the world does not make it any more tolerable or acceptable, which is why it’s encouraging to see the level and seriousness of inter-country cooperation here at this conference. It bodes well for us to find common agreement around this important matter and ensure that we develop a common platform for quick and accurate verification standards that will protect the integrity of our education and training institutions on the continent, as well as the individuals who have worked to achieve their qualifications,” said Mr Jeppie.

Education fraud is a growing trend in many African countries. The reality is that a higher education qualification has real currency, and in a period of increased
migration and mobility of learners and workers, is recognised as a key driver of individual development.

Joe Samuels, CEO of the South African Qualifications Authority added:
“Qualifications have always been central to successful employability and overall mobility, but also accessing higher pay levels, benefits and other perks that come with one’s educated, professional status. It’s one of the key reasons why we have seen the growing trend of faking degrees and, in the feedback from panels of participating countries, PhD fraud among the already employed seems to be on the increase. An unbiased evaluation of qualifications for recognition purposes has become more important than ever, including the verification and comparison of foreign qualifications to local equivalents,” said Mr Samuels.

“The conference participants were unanimous that more stringent steps need to be taken against fraudsters if we are to combat this crime. We cannot continue to trivialise qualifications fraud by using euphemisms like “overstating qualifications” to describe the very real danger to the legitimacy of our education systems and the genuine qualifications held by people who have earned them,” he said.

SAQA is also tasked with evaluating foreign educational qualifications to determine their South African equivalence. Anyone with a foreign qualification who wishes to attend South African education institutions or enter the work force would need to apply to SAQA to have their qualifications firstly verified, and secondly evaluated or mapped against a local equivalent. In the financial year 2013/14, SAQA evaluated 36,349 qualifications from 143 countries – with the top five countries of origin being Zimbabwe, India, Nigeria, the UK and DRC.

A paper developed by SAQA in 2013 for an international conference on combating qualification fraud highlighted 137 confirmed forgeries in foreign qualification evaluations undertaken by SAQA between July 2012 and June 2013. While the total figure is less than 1%, current statistics from SAQA do reflect an increase in forgeries in the first four months of the 2014/15 financial year. There are also reports of syndicates dealing in counterfeit qualification documents. For example, in May 2012, SAQA received communication from the University of Cape Coast in Ghana expressing suspicion that a syndicate had issued forged certificates in the field of teaching, particularly in specialisations of mathematics and science.

SAQA evaluates foreign qualifications in two related phases. The verification process confirms the status of an institution and a qualification in a national system, as well as the authenticity of related documents and whether the qualification had been awarded to a particular individual. Once completed, the next phase begins which analyses the structure and outcomes of a foreign qualification, comparing it to the nearest South African qualification, and thus locating it within the South African National Qualifications Framework (NQF).
“The real challenge for all qualification evaluation bodies lies in the need to receive accurate and trustworthy information to dispel any suspicion of fraudulent activities while implementing a system that responds quickly and cost-efficiently to the needs of stakeholders. Currently this is a time and resource intensive process, and because of the delays in obtaining feedback, many evaluation decisions remain on hold indefinitely, and this has serious implications for the work and study prospects of applicants. This is one of the key obstacles we are hoping to address by developing an African Qualifications Verification Network (AQVN) that delivers a credible, trustworthy network of public verification institutions with central-on-line digital learner records databases providing a fast and affordable service on the continent,” explains Mr Samuels.

Education fraud happens in many settings, from unscrupulous providers who are unregistered and unaccredited, offering unregistered qualifications, through to ‘diploma mills’ and syndicates that sell falsified diplomas and certificates. There are also registered institutions awarding unrecognised qualifications, through to legitimate organisations employing creative marketing practices to attract clients – for example offering “NQF-aligned” courses – there is no such thing as an ‘NQF-aligned’ diploma. The most commonly forged certificates are school leaving certificates (41%), degrees (32%) and diplomas (13%).

“Many of the verification challenges experienced in South Africa are mirrored in other African countries, so it makes sense to pool our experiences and skills to create a collaborative, digital hub that services the purposes of countering qualification fraud through education, enhanced security features, digital verification, improved legislation and international partnerships,” concludes Mr Samuels.

The two-day conference culminated in the development of a joint declaration amongst representatives from qualifications and quality assurance bodies, federal, regional and provincial agencies, education and training institutions and national departments of higher education and training from 14 countries to combat qualification fraud on the continent through structured relationships and defining the institutional arrangements between SAQA and recognised bodies responsible for verification of learner records in countries in the African continent. The participating countries are South Africa, Botswana, Cameroon, DRC, Gabon, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Swaziland.

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