Lessons from the South African National Qualifications Framework

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In this paper I will give an overview of the South African National Qualifications Framework (SANQF) and the key lessons learnt with a view to providing participants with an exemplar of a comprehensive national qualifications framework.

Overview of the SANQF

When our SANQF was legislated in October 1995, it was the first piece of education and training legislation promulgated by our first democratically elected government. It was significant also in that it was enabling legislation as opposed to prescriptive legislation. This on its own presented the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), a statutory body established in terms of the SAQA Act of 1995, with challenges to establish the SANQF which was one of the first generation qualifications frameworks. The two international bodies that we could easily learn from at that time were the New Zealand Qualifications Authority and the Scottish Qualifications Authority. Other important systems' learnings came from Canada, Germany, Ireland and England. The concepts underpinning a national qualifications framework (nqf) had to be developed and communicated. Policy and regulations had to be developed in democratically legitimated ways. Given the transformation imperative of the South African context, this proved no easy task. Organisation and systems building at SAQA was not an easy task. The historical trajectories that pushed South Africa towards transformation also pulled it back. There were many nqf skeptics. A constant refrain at consultative meetings were variations of the following questions:

- Where in the world are nqfs working?
- Where are the international comparators?
- How much do nqfs cost and is it worth it?

At the initial stage of developing and implementing the SANQF in 1997, (the SAQA Board was appointed in May 1996, had its first meeting in August 1996, and the first staff member appointed in March 1997), we had to find an acceptable and accountable way to proceed with building both SAQA and the SANQF. To do this, I borrowed the title of Paolo Freire and Miles Horton's book, "We make the road by walking", and introduced the metaphor, "**We will make the NQF Road by walking reflectively, accountably and boldly**". This metaphor recognised the social constructedness of nqfs, while at the same time placing intellectual scrutiny, democratic participation and accountability, and leadership at the core of the SANQF's development and implementation.

At the very onset we realized that resource and funding constraints were critical determinants for the success or failure of the SANQF. The three necessary conditions for success were stated as democratic participation, intellectual scrutiny and resourcing   (especially the aligning of financial, organisational and institutional resources). Throughout its existence SAQA has endeavoured to be an honest broker in working with SANQF stakeholders and has always striven to take intellectual scrutiny (in its various forms such as academic scrutiny, international comparators and world-class best practice) very seriously. This deep integrity has stood SAQA in good stead as it faced the many challenges in developing and implementing the SANQF and will continue to do so in the future.

From an operational point of view, the following three inter-related sub-systems were required:

- Standards Setting
- Quality Assurance
- Electronic Management Information System

Annexure 1 gives a graphical representation of our initial system and structures. Each of these sub-systems has its own inherent challenges. When these were linked to our historical trajectory and immediate context, policy choices had to be made and accounted for. We did this through two sets of gazetted regulations: The National Standards Bodies' (NSB) Regulations (March, 1998) and the Education and Training Quality Assurance Bodies' (ETQA) Regulations (September, 1998). We did not require a separate set of regulations for our electronic management information system, (which we called the National Learners' Records Database, NLRD), as this was

covered in the two sets. These regulations defined the processes and structures that would be used to develop and implement the core deliverables of the SANQF, namely the three sub-systems referred to above.

The key issues that emanated from these three sub-systems were the:

- Democratic participation of stakeholders
- Integration of education and training
- Separation of standards setting and quality assurance
- Exit level outcomes and assessment criteria
- Academic freedom and autonomy
- Power shifts and contestations among various stakeholders and role-players
- Sustainable organisational capacity and resources to lead and manage the processes

The SANQF has been extremely well documented and researched and I can make a comprehensive bibliography available for those wishing to look at the fine detail of how these issues impacted on its development and implementation. However it was the power shifts and contestations and the strategies to recognize and manage these that proved the most challenging. The SANQF was barely operational at the end of 1998 and already the call for its review was being mooted in some sectors but for different reasons. SAQA's ability to lead and manage processes in this climate was severely constrained by funding and other resourcing difficulties. To illustrate this point, SAQA was receiving at that time approximately twenty percent of its budget from the state and eighty percent from international donors. The European Union was a significant funder and a disproportionate amount of senior management time was spent on fundraising and ensuring its proper stewardship and SAQA's sustainability. The Ministers of Education and Labour announced a review of the SANQF in 2001. The review report was tabled in 2002 for public comments by 30 October 2002. A response document was tabled by the Departments of Education and Labour in July 2003 for public comments by October of the same year. The review process remained unconcluded until a Joint Policy Statement was issued by Ministers of Education and Labour in November 2007 and new legislation, the NQF Act (2008) was signed into law in February 2009 and became effective 1 June 2009. The review of the SANQF had taken an official period of seven years but its effect on its development and implementation

extended from at least 2000 to the present as we worked through the uncertainty created by the review process and the transition from the provisions of the SAQA Act to the NQF Act. After our fourth democratic elections in 1995 the Department of Education has been split into the Department or Higher Education and Training (which includes the Skills Development section of the Department of Labour) and the Department of Basic Education (which deals with schools). This new environment brings significant opportunities to better manage and in some instances resolve the key issues affecting the SANQF. Annexure 2 gives a snapshot of the review process. The role of SAQA and the three Quality Councils under the NQF Act are given in Annexures 3 -12.

This new architecture of the SANQF and its structures under the NQF Act attempt to resolve the issues previously stated and we are hard at work to ensure its success.

A significant change in the global environment has been the development of second and third generation qualifications frameworks (See Annexure 13 for a categorization by Arjen Deij of the European Training Foundation). The global phenomenon of formal national, regional and transnational qualifications frameworks effectively means that no country or region can ignore them. A country has to engage with them and if it does not have a formalised nqf, it has to make its qualifications' arrangements transparent to its citizens and global partners for a variety of reasons from lifelong learning through to good governance and international trade. Nqfs are an attempt at finding a convenient shorthand to describe complex education and training systems in a similar way in which macro-economic indicators describe national economies. One of the successes of SAQA has been the establishment and development of the nqf discourse in South Africa. The SANQF is alive, debated, contested and used in South Africa. It is increasingly being understood as a framework for communication, co-ordination and collaboration across education, training, development and work. In South Africa it is seen as an important policy for advancing lifelong learning. The recent OECD Report on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning which includes South Africa is very insightful in the progress we have made in this regard.

SAQA's role as the apex SANQF body in the further development and implementation of our nqf is pivotal to ensuring access and success for all

South Africans wishing to achieve nationally recognised and international comparable quality qualifications.

Key lessons learnt

When I reflect on the development and implementation of our SANQF over the past fifteen years, I think we have learnt the following lessons:
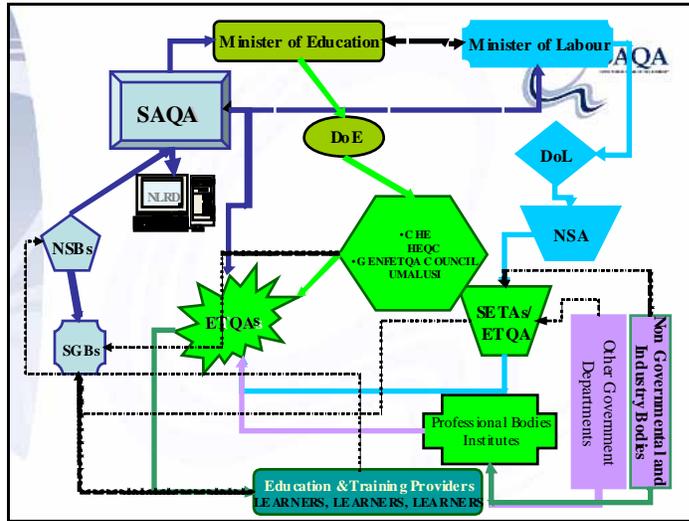
1. It is important to understand the purposes for developing and maintaining an nqf in your context because it provides the vision and raison d'etre for it.
2. Understand the limitations of nqfs. Far too many people have unrealistic expectations of what can be achieved through qualifications frameworks alone.
3. Take intellectual scrutiny most seriously because the credibility and effectiveness of your nqf depends on it. Nqfs should not be seen as purely technical instruments to be implemented in overly bureaucratic and technicist manners.
4. Active stakeholder and role-player participation is essential for building the relationships that facilitate collaborative networks that make shared understandings, shared meanings and shared strategies possible. In South Africa this has led directly to our current understanding of the SANQF as a framework for communication, co-ordination and collaboration across education, training, development and work. To this end SAQA, as custodian of the SANQF, has had to work exceedingly hard and carefully at relationship building in partnership with all role-players and stakeholders over the past 14 years.
5. Communication and advocacy are essential for informing the public of the value-add that the SANQF offers them. This function requires significant resourcing which is often overlooked in favour of the more visible operational activities required.
6. Recognise the power shifts and contestations. Finding viable and reasonable resolutions to power struggles can go a long way to advancing an environment that supports lifelong learning and is conducive to quality learning and credible qualifications.
7. The direct involvement of professional bodies has been a vital component of the SANQF. New understandings of professional designations, and the entrance of professional bodies in a previously excluded sector, have been of great benefit to the system as a whole.

8. The inclusion of non-formal and informal learning in an nqf is always going to be a challenge, but cannot be ignored. Through involvement in initiatives like that organised by the OECD we need to collectively find new ways to address this key challenge that forms a critically important part of an nqf.

9. Nqfs are about systems change and change is not easy in most circumstances. When we come to education and training systems change we have huge inertia to overcome in order to effect change. A particular thorny issue is curriculum development and change. This is extremely contested terrain. The SANQF, because it respected the academic freedom and autonomy of institutions, did not seek to involve itself in curriculum development as a whole but restricted itself in standards setting to the exit level outcomes and assessment criteria for qualifications (unquestionably a part of curriculum development). The power shift to national standards setting bodies and standards generating bodies (however well conceived and consulted) proved too difficult to manage for a number of reasons. Chief reasons were that SAQA had limited resources to manage these bodies effectively and that traditional sectors resented having to subject their qualifications to this wider scrutiny by other sectors which they regarded as non-expert for their sector. A second thorny issue was the accreditation of existing and newly formed statutory bodies as education and training quality assurance bodies with powers to quality assure education and training institutions and providers. The resolution of these two issues was the establishment of three quality councils with both standards setting and quality assurance functions for their respective sectors. Within this new environment sector-specific approaches are now being accommodated, including the preference for a curriculum-based approach preferred in the schooling and higher education sectors. This accommodation has diffused the contestations of using learning outcomes within South Africa.

10. International networks and relationships were most helpful in enabling us to reflect deeply on our nqf policy and practice. Participating in international research initiatives on nqfs has also been a mutual enrichment of both the SANQF and the international nqf discourse. Qualifications frameworks have introduced new thinking when it comes to the recognition of learning – this new thinking will continue to challenge traditional approaches and will in all probability be overtaken by new developments in the future. While nqfs are certainly not panaceas, they have proven to respond well to the challenges of
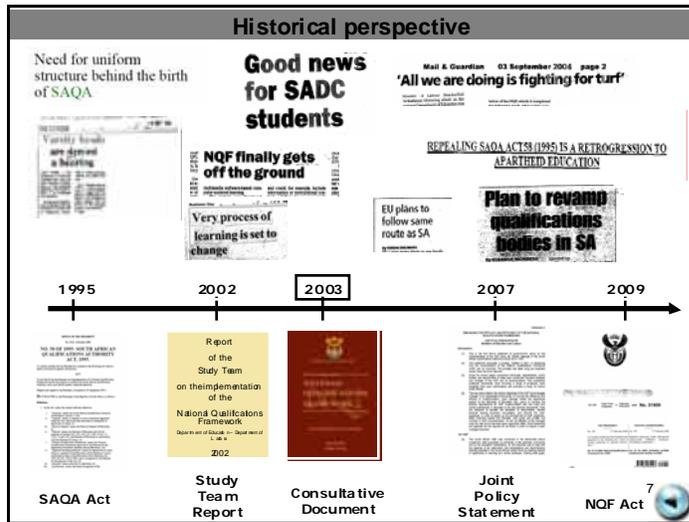
globalisation and increased migration of highly skilled professionals. The more than one hundred countries and at least five regions developing qualifications frameworks bear testimony to this.

SAQA's journey of maturation has been marked by the metaphors we use for our work. From 1996 to 2006 we made "the NQF road by walking reflectively, accountably and boldly". During 2007, we took inspiration from sculptor Orlando de Almeida's work "Moving into dance". The work is described as a "sculpture of seven dancing figures, representing harmony, fluidity and change – symbolic of the transition that has taken place in the country". Thus the metaphor of "moving into the NQF dance" was conceived. The vision became the "NQF dance with all roleplayers in harmony, fluidity and change, enabling the dance of lifelong learning". We are beginning to experience the greater partnership in the NQF dance in the areas of advocacy, communication, researching work and learning, career guidance and counseling, and in ensuring quality learning. Our focus is on the learners and on quality learning.
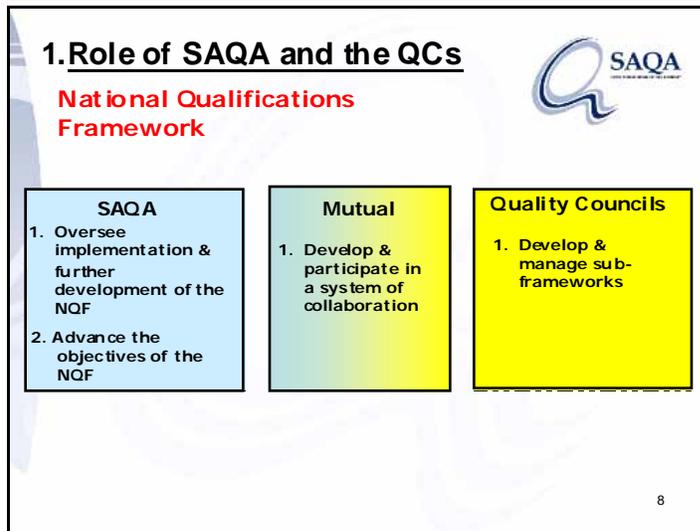
Annexure 1

Minister of Education — Minister of Labour

SAQA

SAQA

DoE

DoL

NLRD

NSBs

NSA

•CHE HEQC
•GENFETQA COUNCIL UMALUSI

ETQAs

SETAs/ETQA

Other Government Departments

Non Governmental and Industry Bodies

SGBs

Professional Bodies Institutes

Education & Training Providers
LEARNERS, LEARNERS, LEARNERS

Annexure 2

Historical perspective

Need for uniform structure behind the birth of SAQA

Good news for SADC students

Mail & Guardian 03 September 2004 page 2
'All we are doing is fighting for turf'

NQF finally gets off the ground

REPEALING SAQA ACT58 (1995) IS A RETROGRESSION TO APARTHEID EDUCATION

Very process of learning is set to change

EU plans to follow same route as SA

Plan to revamp qualifications bodies in SA

1995   2002   2003   2007   2009

Report of the Study Team on the implementation of the National Qualifications Framework Department of Education — Department of Labour 2002

SAQA Act   Study Team Report   Consultative Document   Joint Policy Statement   NQF Act

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Annexure 3

1. Role of SAQA and the QCs

SAQA

National Qualifications Framework

SAQA
1. Oversee implementation & further development of the NQF
2. Advance the objectives of the NQF

Mutual
1. Develop & participate in a system of collaboration

Quality Councils
1. Develop & manage sub-frameworks

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Annexure 4

1.Role of SAQA and the QCs

Level descriptors

SAQA	Mutual	Quality Councils
1. Develop contents of level descriptors and reach agreement with the QCs	1. Ensure that level descriptors remain current & appropriate	1. Consider & agree to level descriptors

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Annexure 5

1.Role of SAQA and the QCs

Qualifications

SAQA	Mutual	Quality Councils
1. Register qualifications	1. Develop & implement policy & criteria for qualifications, assessment	1. Develop qualifications as needed in the sector 2. Recommend qualifications to SAQA for registration

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Annexure 6

1.Role of SAQA and the QCs

Quality Assurance (QA)

SAQA	Mutual	Quality Councils
1. No executive QA function 2. Coordinate across sub-frameworks 3. Periodic impact studies of the NQF	1. Ensure integrity and credibility 2. Collaborate on research and impact studies	1. Executive QA function 2. Ensure that quality assurance is undertaken for the sub-framework

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Annexure 7

1.Role of SAQA and the QCs

Research

SAQA	Mutual	Quality Councils
1. Conduct regular studies on the impact of the NQF 2. Maintain and further develop a collaborative research agenda relevant to the development and implementation of the NQF	1. Conduct & commission research 2. Publish findings 3. Collaborate on respective research agendas	1. Focus on sub-framework specific research

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Annexure 8

1.Role of SAQA and the QCs

Information management

SAQA	Mutual	Quality Councils
1. Maintain and further development the NLRD	1. Ensure integrity and validity of data 2. Analyse data and report findings	1. Maintain a database of learner achievements and related matters 2. Submit data to SAQA for the NLRD

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Annexure 9

1.Role of SAQA and the QCs

Advocacy & marketing

SAQA	Mutual	Quality Councils
1. Inform the public about the NQF	1. Collectively advocate the NQF	1. Inform the public about the sub-framework

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Annexure 10

1. Role of SAQA and the QCs

Professional Bodies

SAQA	Mutual	Quality Councils
1. Develop & implement policy & criteria for recognising professional bodies & registering professional designations 2. Recognise professional bodies 3. Register professional designations	1. Consult with professional bodies	1. Include professional bodies in quality assurance and the qualifications development

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Annexure 11

1. Role of SAQA and the QCs

International relations

SAQA	Mutual	Quality Councils
1. Collaborate with international counterparts concerning QFs 2. Inform the QCs and other parties about international best practice	1. Collaborate with international counterparts	1. Benchmark qualifications internationally 2. Consider international best practice

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Annexure 12

1. Role of SAQA and the QCs

Other responsibilities

SAQA	Quality Councils
1. Provide an evaluation and advisory service 2. Advise Ministers on NQF matters 3. Perform any other functions required by the NQF Act 4. Perform any function consistent with the NQF Act determined by the Minister	1. Advise Minister on sub-frameworks 2. Perform any other functions required by the NQF Act 3. Perform any function consistent with the NQF Act determined by the Minister

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Annexure 13

drivers for developing qualifications frameworks (Arjen Deij)

SAQA

1st generation Qualifications Frameworks	2nd generation Qualifications Frameworks	3rd generation Qualifications Frameworks
Developed from national perceptions, mainly determined by internal drivers, and often using experimental approaches	Have tried to learn from 1st generation experiences, in terms of design and processes. Seeking more communication with other national systems on a bilateral basis, but influence of external drivers is limited	Internal drivers remain important, but external drivers have a significant impact on the technical design of frameworks and the QA arrangements

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