



Transforming Education in South Africa: The Role of SAQA

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The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) was established by the SAQA Act (No.58 of 1995) as part of a wave of educational reforms that swept through South Africa after the end of apartheid in 1994. The primary aim was to create a fair and equitable system of education, training and development that could address the disparities left by the apartheid system. SAQA's creation was a crucial step towards developing an integrated approach to education, training and development that would reflect a new, democratic ethos in the nation.

Background and Establishment

The concept for the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) in South Africa, which SAQA was set up to oversee, arose from the need to unify the country's previously segregated and unequal education systems under apartheid. Under apartheid, education was divided along racial lines, creating vast discrepancies in quality and accessibility between the various groups. The NQF was designed to address these inequalities, offering a single integrated framework that would facilitate access to, and mobility and progression within, education, training, and career paths. The goal was to create a unified system where education, training, and development are equally valued, facilitating movement and advancement within the educational and training framework.

SAQA's goal from its inception was to oversee the development and implementation of the NQF, which was envisioned as a comprehensive system that integrates learning achievements. The NQF includes school and adult education, vocational training and skills development, and occupational and higher education qualifications in a single, cohesive structure. SAQA's mandate includes coordinating the three NQF sub-frameworks in which the different types of qualification feature.

Functions and Objectives

SAQA's main functions include and are not limited to:

- 1. Developing the NQF:** We are working with the three Quality Councils, Umalusi, Council on Higher Education (CHE) and Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO), each responsible for managing one of the NQF sub-frameworks and the level descriptors that set the standards for qualifications at each level of the NQF. These descriptors are essential as they outline the general types and levels of knowledge, skills, and values required and ensure the consistency and quality of registered qualifications.
- 2. Credit Accumulation and Transfer:** SAQA is actively developing and managing the national policy for credit accumulation and transfer (CAT). This policy allows students to switch between various departments, educational institutions, and sectors within the education and training system, without having to repeat their already completed studies.
- 3. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL):** SAQA also continues to develop and oversee the implementation of the RPL policy which encourages the recognition of skills and knowledge people have acquired outside formal education. This is particularly important in a country like South Africa where many people have acquired skills informally.
- 4. Registering Qualifications:** SAQA adds qualifications to the NQF when they are submitted by Quality Councils, meet the required standards, are part of clear learning and work pathways, include options for recognising prior learning (RPL), and are comparable internationally.
- 5. Recognising Professional Bodies:** SAQA approves professional bodies that align with the values of the South African Constitution. This includes basing their professional designations on NQF-registered qualifications, providing RPL pathways, and ensuring their processes are quality-assured, fair, and transparent.
- 6. Authentication Services:** SAQA verifies the authenticity of national qualifications and evaluates foreign qualifications in relation to our national system, to support access to further education, work, and professional growth in South Africa. It also maintains a register to track false qualification claims.
- 7. Research:** SAQA conducts research to implement and enhance the NQF and to evaluate its effectiveness. All SAQA's actions are based on solid evidence.
- 8. NQF Management Information System:** The National Learners' Records Database (NLRD) is the management information system of the NQF. The NLRD holds records of all NQF information, including the Register of Qualifications and the register of Professional Bodies and their Designations. It also by law, should hold all data related to the achievement of registered national qualifications, which provides every individual with an authentic qualification achievement and the assurance that their achievements are recorded on a national database. It provides decision-makers with comprehensive aggregated information, especially in the fields of labour market trends; education and training; and career advice.
- 9. Advocacy and Public Information Services:** SAQA informs the public about the NQF and its operations, helping people understand and access its benefits. This includes providing guidance on how to use the NQF and supporting lifelong learning opportunities.

The introduction of the NQF and the work of SAQA have significantly impacted South Africa's education and training sectors in several keyways:

- 1. Quality Assurance:** SAQA collaborates with Quality Councils and professional bodies to register, verify, and evaluate qualifications. This ensures that South African qualifications meet high standards for knowledge, competence, quality, relevance, learning-and-work pathways, accessibility, and international comparability. Such measures are vital for maintaining the integrity of the educational system and for the international recognition of South African qualifications.
- 2. Increased Access to Learning and Work Pathways:** By aligning qualifications with NQF levels and promoting flexible learning paths, SAQA has helped break down educational barriers. More South Africans now have access to learning opportunities that lead to recognised qualifications, improving their job and development prospects.
- 3. Support for Lifelong Learning:** The NQF promotes lifelong learning by providing a structured framework that allows individuals to progress at different stages of their lives, addressing the diverse education, training, and development needs of the country.
- 4. Inclusivity in Education:** SAQA's policies have made education more inclusive. Recognizing Prior Learning (RPL) has opened opportunities for those marginalised from the formal education system, helping to address past and current socio-economic inequalities.
- 5. Transparency in the System:** The NQF ensures transparency within South Africa's education, training, and development systems. Information about educational quality, relevance, levels, access, learning pathways, careers, and professional development is readily available to the public through the websites and help desks of SAQA and the Education Departments.

SAQA's role has been crucial in transforming education, training, and development in South Africa, aligning them with the values of the country's Constitution. Moving forward, SAQA aims to embed the NQF even more deeply across all entities to maximise efficiency and effectiveness in pursuit of social justice for all.