

Ensuring the Continuity of Lifelong Learning through the Transition of Pre-2009 Qualifications

Introduction

The South African education system has undergone significant transformation with the establishment and evolution of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and its three sub-frameworks managed by QCTO, CHE and Umalusi respectively. A key outcome of these changes and the maturing of the sub frameworks, is the need to align qualifications to the needs of industry, including pre-2009 qualifications—developed before the introduction of the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) and the Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework (OQSF)—with the current ten-level qualifications framework. This process is essential to ensure that learners continue to benefit from a clear, accessible, and relevant system that supports lifelong learning.

This document aims to inform and educate various stakeholders on the importance of this transition and the role each stakeholder plays in ensuring that learners remain at the centre of this process.

The Current Challenge

South Africa's transition in 2008/9 from an eight-level NQF system to a ten-level framework, which includes three distinct sub-frameworks, has left many qualifications outdated and invalid. In particular, the unit standards-based qualifications registered on the NQF within the Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework (OQSF) fall into this category, while reviewed and renewed occupational qualifications that are responsive to industry and society needs, are not yet available. This leaves learners and industries without clarity or continuity.

The Minister of Higher Education and Training determined in 2012 that pre-2009 qualifications will remain valid until its registration expires or replaced by an occupational qualification. While a ministerial directive in 2020 extended the enrolment period for pre-2009 qualifications, many of these qualifications were not reviewed, meaning they may no longer be available for future learners. This transition is being managed carefully to avoid disrupting learners' progress or creating skills shortages in industries reliant on these qualifications.

Why This Transition Matters for Learners

The primary goal of aligning pre-2009 qualifications with the current OQSF is to ensure that learners—whether they are students, professionals upskilling, or workers

transitioning between careers—are not left behind in an evolving educational landscape. The principle of lifelong learning and quality education is at the heart of this transition. It is vital that every learner has access to qualifications that are recognised, relevant, and aligned with current industry standards. The pre-2009 qualifications, now over 15 years old, were not reviewed and are not aligned with current industry standards.

Without this alignment, many learners who are in the process of completing pre-2009 qualifications could find themselves with qualifications that are no longer relevant or useful in their chosen fields. Additionally, new learners seeking to acquire skills in fields governed by these qualifications could face a gap in available education and training options.

Key Stakeholders and Their Roles

SAQA (South African Qualifications Authority)

As the custodian of the NQF, SAQA has the responsibility to ensure the continuity, validity and relevance of all qualifications across sectors. The transition of pre-2009 qualifications is a key priority for SAQA, as it:

- **Protects learners' interests** by ensuring that qualifications remain valid and responsive to industry and society needs.
- **Supports lifelong learning** by allowing learners to continue their education without disruption, offering flexibility through the potential registration of small units of learning.
- **Coordinates stakeholders** to ensure a smooth transition, bringing together SETAs, QCTO, professional bodies, and educational institutions to manage the process collaboratively.

SETAs (Sector Education and Training Authorities)

SETAs are responsible for managing skills development in their respective economic sectors by mapping skills demand, and identifying priorities for skill development in its sector, making their role critical in this transition. SETAs must:

- **Review and align qualifications:** Work closely with SAQA and QCTO to ensure that pre-2009 qualifications within their sectors are reviewed and, where necessary, aligned with the OQSF.
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- **Support learners in transition:** Ensure that learners who are currently enrolled in pre-2009 qualifications can complete their qualifications or transition smoothly to equivalent, modern occupational qualifications.
- **Advocate for transition and engage with industry stakeholders** to identify which qualifications are most crucial for their sectors, ensuring that skills development continues without disruption.

QCTO (Quality Council for Trades and Occupations)

The QCTO is responsible for the development and quality assurance of occupational qualifications. In this process, the QCTO must:

- **Ensure quality assurance:** Maintain high standards for occupational qualifications that are being transitioned or newly developed to replace pre-2009 qualifications.
- **Collaborate with SETAs:** Ensure that SETAs are supported in their efforts to align pre-2009 qualifications with the OQSF.
- **Maintain learner focus:** Make certain that all qualifications, whether pre-2009 or new, provide learners with the skills they need for their occupations and are recognised by employers.

Educational Institutions and Skills Development Providers

Educational institutions and skills development providers offering pre-2009 qualifications must:

- **Adapt to the new framework:** Ensure that their programmes are aligned with the current NQF and meet the OQSF standards and constantly review curricula.
- **Comply:** ensure that they provide programmes against appropriately registered qualifications
- **Contribute:** provide input and contribute to review and currency of national qualifications through the relevant structures in their sub frameworks

- **Communicate changes to learners:** Provide clear guidance and information to learners about the transition, ensuring they understand how their qualifications will be affected and what steps they need to take to complete their studies.

Professional Bodies

Professional bodies in South Africa must:

- **Ensure alignment with industry needs:** Work closely with SETAs, QCTO, and SAQA to ensure that qualifications required for the awarding of professional designations are aligned with the current NQF.
- **Support learners and professionals:** Ensure that both current professionals and future learners can gain qualifications that meet the requirements for awarding professional designations, ensuring continuous professional development and lifelong learning.

Industry Stakeholders

Industry stakeholders, including employers, associations, and trade bodies, have a vested interest in ensuring that the qualifications system remains responsive and continues to produce appropriately skilled workers. They must:

- **Identify skills needs:** Provide feedback to SETAs and professional bodies on the qualifications and skills most critical to their industries.
- **Support learners and employees:** Ensure that employees who hold pre-2009 qualifications can transition smoothly to updated qualifications, supporting their professional development and maintaining workforce competency.

Emphasising the Benefit to the Learner

The core focus of this transition is the benefit to the learner. Every action taken by SAQA, SETAs, QCTO, educational providers, and industry must prioritise learners, ensuring that:

- **Learners are not disadvantaged:** Whether they are current learners completing pre-2009 qualifications or new learners entering the system, they must have access to qualifications that are valid, relevant, and recognised and have a right to current and updated content.
- **Access to education remains open:** Lifelong learning requires flexibility. By aligning pre-2009 qualifications with the OQSF, we ensure that learners continue to have opportunities to upskill, reskill, and remain competitive in the job market.
- **The transition is seamless:** Learners should not experience disruption during the transition. Clear communication and support must be provided to guide them through the process.

Key Considerations

1. **Learner-Centric Approach:** The primary goal of this transition is to ensure that learners—whether current or future—continue to have access to qualifications that are valid, relevant, and aligned with current and future industry and society requirements. Ensuring that learners are not left behind in the process is central to the success of this transition.
2. **Collaboration Across Stakeholders:** SAQA, SETAs, QCTO, educational institutions, professional bodies, and industry stakeholders must work closely together to ensure the smooth transition of pre-2009 qualifications. This collaboration is essential to aligning qualifications with the current Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework (OQSF) and maintaining the relevance of skills development.
3. **Support for Lifelong Learning:** The alignment of qualifications supports South Africa’s commitment to lifelong learning, ensuring that individuals have continuous access to education and training opportunities that help them remain competitive in the job market
4. **Minimising Disruption for Learners:** The transition process should be managed in a way that minimises disruption for learners. Clear communication, policy frameworks, and transitional support mechanisms are needed to ensure that learners can complete their qualifications without complications or delays
5. **Meeting Industry Needs:** Industry stakeholders play a crucial role in identifying the skills and qualifications that are critical to their sectors. Ensuring that pre-2009 qualifications are updated or replaced with these needs will help address any skills gaps and maintain a skilled workforce.
6. **Small Units of Learning:** There is a need to consider the registration of pre-2009-unit standards as standalone small units of learning that offers a flexible solution for learners seeking specific skills. This approach aligns with the demands of both learners and industry for modular, accessible learning options. However, any decisions regarding such an arrangement will be based on data analysis of learner achievements loaded on the National Learners’ Records Database.

By focusing on these key areas, all stakeholders can contribute to a qualifications system that continues to serve the needs of learners, industries, and South Africa’s broader economy.

Conclusion

The alignment of pre-2009 qualifications with the OQSF is not just a technical adjustment; it is a necessary step to protect the integrity of the South African qualifications system and to ensure that all learners, regardless of when they began their studies, can benefit from a responsive system that prioritises their success. By working together, stakeholders across the education and training landscape can ensure that this transition supports the principles of lifelong learning, equips learners with relevant and recognised qualifications, and meets the needs of industries across the country and the global landscape.

For all stakeholders involved, the focus must remain on ensuring that learners are at the centre of this process. Every decision made during this transition should enhance the learner's experience, provide them with opportunities for access and mobility, and help them achieve their educational and professional goals.