



Groningen Declaration Network (GDN) Annual Meeting

(7-9 Oct 2024, San Diego, USA)

SAQA Talks Feedback

05 March 2025



Contents

- SAQA delegation
- Overview of the GDN Annual Meeting
- Two SAQA Presentations
- Highlights from some sessions
- Key takeaways for SAQA
- Next GDN Annual Meetings

SAQA Delegation to the GDN 2024

1

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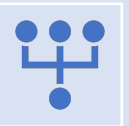
GDN Annual Meeting – An Overview



This presentation provides an overview of the **13th Groningen Declaration Network (GDN) Annual Meeting** held in San Diego, California, USA, **7-9 October 2024**.



About the GDN: Mainly focuses on **digital student data portability, skills mobility, and credential recognition** among various educational and governmental stakeholders.



The 2024 Annual Meeting was attended by different entities (including qualifications authorities) with **approximately 100 institutions/participants**.



Two SAQA Presentations to the GDN

Presentation One: Southern African Skills Mobility & Qualifications Frameworks (A Joint Presentation). Focus: Skills mobility using regional frameworks and UNESCO Conventions



South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA)



Eswatini Qualifications Authority (EQA)



Zambia Qualifications Authority (ZAQA)



Joint presentation highlighted (contexts of three countries):

- Social, economic standing of the three SADC countries
- Population sizes (served by NQFs, education and training systems...)
- Historical/political contexts (SA = poverty, inequality, unemployment 30 years into democracy)
- Fragmented qualifications, weak lifelong learning opportunities, low employability integration (Eswatini).

NQF structures, design, objectives:

- SANQF, ESQF, ZQF = all 10 level frameworks
- Aimed at enabling mobility of learners within, across, qualifications, Sub-Frameworks/sectors, countries, access, comparability of qualifications, towards socially just societies

| UNESCO Conventions and regional frameworks | Country ratification/referencing/implementation status |
|---|---|
| Addis Convention (UNESCO): Legal framework for recognising higher education qualifications in Africa. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SA and Zambia ratified convention and provisions being implemented • Eswatini in process. |
| Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ratified by SA • In process of ratification by Zambia and Eswatini |
| SADCQF (10-level framework for regional qualifications comparability, credit transfer, and skills mobility) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SA NQF referenced to SADC QF • Zambia and Eswatini initiating referencing to SADCQF |
| ACQF (a 'translation device' and meta-framework with 10 levels to harmonize national/regional systems) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SA and Zambia initiating referencing to ACQF, and implementing mechanisms for recognition of refugees/ the displaced • Eswatini initiating referencing to ACQF |

Highlighted the following:

- **Common issues:** Fragmented qualifications (Eswatini), access, redress, mobility, articulation, social justice (in context of poverty, inequality and unemployment) (SA, Eswatini, Zambia)
- **Solutions:** lifelong learning policies; alignment of NQFs with regional/continental frameworks and UNESCO conventions; bilateral/multilateral agreements (e.g., Mutual Recognition of Qualifications).
- Each country's progress reflected on a shared vision for inclusive, comparable qualifications, lifelong learning, and mobility.
- *Overall: Enhancing Southern African Skills Mobility: The African Continental Qualifications Framework was a joint Afrocentric presentation by SAQA (South Africa), EQA (Eswatini) , and ZQA (Zambia). It focused on mobility, comparability, and progression enabled by ACQF, SADCQF, NQFs, mutual recognition of qualifications, the Addis Convention, and the Global Convention.*



Presentation Two: Micro-credentials / Small Units of Learning in the South African NQF Context. **Focus:** SAQA's developments around micro-credentials

Highlighted the following:

- **Key Drivers (why micro-credentials are topical):** workforce upskilling (4IR, AI, post-COVID shifts); lifelong learning for societal and labour market needs; migration trends (refugees, asylum seekers); alignment with UNESCO SDGs and Addis Convention, Global Convention.
- **What Are Micro-Credentials?:** There is *no globally agreed-upon definition*, with ongoing debates and regional differences. *Various terms* like "digital badges," "micro-certifications," and "micro-degrees" are used interchangeably. In the **South Africa context**, terms like "unit standards," "part-qualifications" (NQF-registered), and "short courses" (non-NQF) are used.

Highlighted some similarities/differences between ‘micro-credential’ and ‘unit standard’:

| | MICRO-CREDENTIAL | UNIT STANDARD |
|-------------------|---|---|
| Definition | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> "A record of focused learning achievement verifying what the learner knows, understands, or can do" (UNESCO, 2022). "Certification of assessed learning that is additional, alternate, complementary to or a component part of a formal qualification" (Australian Micro-credentials Framework, 2022). | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> "A part-qualification registered on the NQF developed under the SAQA Act" (Act 58 of 1995, replaced by NQF Act 67 of 2008) (SAQA, NQFpedia, 2018). "Registered statement of desired education and training outcomes [what a learner knows, understands, or can do] and its associated assessment criteria together with administrative and other information as specified in the regulations" (SAQA Website) |

Key Stats (2018–2023)

Shared some National Learners' Records Database (NLRD) data on unit standards:

- **7,021 unit standards** were registered on the NQF (mostly 1–20 credits).
- **9.6M+ learner achievements** recorded against them.

Top Fields:

- Business, Commerce & Management (1.8M achievements).
 - Law, Military & Security (1.6M achievements).
 - Education, Training & Development (1.3M achievements)
 - Arts and Culture (lowest: 28k achievements)
- NQF Level 4 had the most unit standards (1 779) with 1-20 credits.
 - Most unit standards fall under **Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework (OQSF)**.



Highlights from some sessions

Range of topics: Micro-credentials, digital credentials, AI, Refugees, Quality Assurance...

Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Recognition for Refugees:

AI for eliciting latent skills from unstructured data, assessment to validate them, mapping to World Reference Levels, issuing digital credentials, and recommending pathways) (UNESCO/Parchment/AACRAO)

Making Better Use of Refugees' Skills Faster Through Digital Credentials:

Refugees in Australia face poorer labour market outcomes than other migrants and locals, with employment and skill recognition challenges. Initiatives like VETASSESS's (VET Assessment Service) digital badges aim to improve credential recognition and support refugees' integration into the workforce (serves both migration and national skills recognition)

Connecting the Dots: Creating Connected Services for End Users:

The Norwegian government aims to create one digital public sector by connecting services (social welfare benefits, immigration, tax affairs, banking, education) for prioritised life events, focusing on user-centric experiences, particularly in education: student loans, admission, recognition, career guidance, etc.

Quality Assurance in Credential Assessment: Trusted Official Electronic Exchange of Data & Documents (Canada and World Education Services):

Emphasised the need for quality assurance in assessing international academic credentials, highlighting frameworks like the Groningen Declaration, UNESCO conventions, and Canada's Pan-Canadian Quality Assurance Framework (QAF), which was updated in 2024 to incorporate technological advances and new partnership models.

World Alliance for Micro-credentials (a foundation based in the Netherlands):

A global organisation/ foundation focused on promoting and implementing skills-based micro-credentials through quality procedures, technical specifications, and advocacy, with a diverse membership and expert committee.

'Micro-credential Sense-Making: Mapping Micro-credentials Schemas Through Data:

This session addressed the challenge of fragmented data requirements for micro-credentials by sharing examples of initiatives mapping various data models.

Digital Credentials for Professional Mobility - The Example of GPVault:

GPVault offers a secure digital vault for storing validated professional and educational documents, charging no fees for collection, verification, or storage. GPVault aims to expedite the credential verification process for medical practitioners. GPVault seeks to expedite the credential verification process for medical practitioners (by CGFNS International, Inc.)



Some Takeaways for SAQA

1. Networking Opportunities:

SAQA had the chance to connect with a diverse group of stakeholders, including credential evaluation institutions and experts in recognition, learner mobility, and technology.

2.

AI and Recognition for Refugees: SAQA could explore AI tools for recognising and validating skills of refugees, mapping them to World Reference Levels and issuing digital credentials.

Making Better Use of Refugees' Skills: Implement digital badges and other tools to improve the recognition of refugees' skills.

3. Micro-credential Sense-Making (Mapping through data) in the context of the United States:

SAQA could also explore how to utilise data mapping tools to enhance the global transferability and clarity of micro-credentials.

4. 'Connecting the Dots' (digitisation of all public services) in Norway:

SAQA/ South Africa could learn from the Norwegian model to create user-centric digital public services, enhancing the integration of educational services.

5. World Alliance on Microcredentials (Foundation):

SAQA could learn from the World Alliance for Micro-credentials' initiatives, to develop own micro-credentials framework and enhance own systems.



NEXT GDN ANNUAL MEETINGS

- October 2025: Oslo, Norway
- 2026: South Africa/SAQA to host



**THANK
YOU**

