

Honouring the Past, Empowering the Future: SAQA's Role in Advancing Youth Through the NQF

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Each year on 16 June, South Africa pauses to remember the brave young people who stood against oppression in the 1976 Soweto Uprising. Their courage, driven by a vision of justice and equity in education, reverberates across generations. For the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), Youth Day is more than a commemoration—it is a solemn pledge to build an inclusive, accessible, and empowering education system that honours the legacy of 1976 by creating real opportunities for today's youth.

Youth Day, commemorated annually on June 16th, marks a pivotal moment in South Africa's struggle against apartheid and reflects the enduring spirit of young people in shaping the nation's democratic future. From the perspective of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), Youth Day is not only a commemoration of past sacrifices but also a call to action: to ensure inclusive, accessible, and transformative education and training opportunities that empower young people to participate meaningfully in the socio-economic development of the country.

Introduction

Youth Day honours the memory of the 1976 Soweto Uprising, when students protested the imposition of Afrikaans as the medium of instruction. This historic moment underscores the critical role of youth in confronting injustice and advocating for educational equity. In post-apartheid South Africa, the importance of education as a tool for redress and social transformation remains paramount. SAQA plays a crucial role in empowering young people by managing and implementing the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). This framework establishes a unified national system for recognizing learning achievements, promoting easier access to education and training, and enabling smooth transitions and advancement across educational and career pathways. It also aims to improve the overall quality of education and training, while addressing and correcting historical inequalities in education, training, and employment opportunities.

SAQA's Mandate and the Youth

SAQA is mandated by the National Qualifications Framework Act (No. 67 of 2008) to oversee the development and implementation of the NQF. The NQF is designed to facilitate access, mobility, and progression within education, training, and career paths. These principles are especially significant for young people, who are disproportionately affected by unemployment, skills mismatch, and limited access to quality post-school education.

By recognising all forms of learning, formal, non-formal, and informal, the NQF supports lifelong learning and opens opportunities for youth to have their skills and knowledge formally recognised, regardless of how or where they were acquired.

The Youth and Access to Information

SAQA acknowledges that equitable access to credible qualifications information is foundational for informed career decision-making among youth. Through initiatives like the NQF Information Centre (NIC), school and community outreach programmes, and

participation in awareness campaigns against bogus institutions, SAQA promotes public awareness about recognised qualifications, providers, and opportunities for upskilling.

These interventions are crucial in the context of persistent challenges such as misrepresentation of qualifications, fraud, and the proliferation of unregistered learning institutions that prey on uninformed youth.

Transformative Education as a Legacy of Youth Day

Youth Day compels stakeholders in education and training to reflect on the transformative vision of the NQF. This includes promoting articulation between the different levels of education, fostering partnerships with Professional Bodies, Higher Education Institutions, and TVET Colleges, and creating responsive qualifications that align with South Africa's developmental goals.

The youth of 1976 demanded a just and relevant education. SAQA continues to respond to that call by ensuring that the NQF remains a living framework responsive to the evolving needs of the country and its young citizens. Moreover, the NQF supports equity and redress by enabling Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), which provides alternative routes to certification and qualification for many youths excluded from traditional academic pathways.

Conclusion

Youth Day is a solemn reminder of the power of youth to catalyse change. From SAQA's perspective, the best way to honour the legacy of 1976 is to continue dismantling structural barriers in education, to promote the recognition of all learning, and to create pathways that support the aspirations of all young people. In doing so, SAQA affirms the rights of the youth to quality education, employment opportunities, and full participation in the democratic life of South Africa.

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