The Introduction of the South African National Qualifications Framework: A Brief Overview, with Reference to Higher Education

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1. Introduction

This document is intended to provide an introduction to and broad overview of one of the major changes within the South African Higher Education system at present; that is, the move towards a single National Qualifications Framework (NQF) for all educational offerings. The NQF consists of eight levels, the top four of which refer to higher education.

The creation and implementation of this framework is a bold and ambitious undertaking that aims to bring all learning under a single framework of outcomes-based standards and qualifications, with embedded quality assurance measures. Work on the NQF began in 1997 after the establishment of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). SAQA itself defines the NQF as "A social construct whose meaning has been and will continue to be negotiated by the people, for the people. It is a lifelong learning system that brings together South Africans from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds representing a variety of worldviews, thinking, practice and experience to negotiate and define quality through the synthesis of these".

In late 2001, detailed documents pertaining to the NQF were released for public comment. Although there was strong support for the overall objectives of the NQF, its implementation was seen as more problematic. Two of the major difficulties identified are the complexity and lack of role clarity in the standards-setting process, and the lack of dedicated funding for the implementation.

Overall, the NQF and its implementation must be seen as "work in progress". A recent report of the Study Team on the Implementation of the National Qualifications Framework indicates that, while the move towards an overall qualifications framework for higher education in South Africa is widely supported, the process is a complex one, with many issues still to be resolved.

Therefore, whilst the general structure of the NQF as presented here is accurate at the time of writing, the details and the means of implementation are subject to change. Several sources of information that is periodically updated are provided at the end of this document for those who require further information, or who wish to follow the progress of the implementation of the NQF in South Africa.

2. Background

South Africa’s Higher Education system has been characterised by divisions and disparities, both across racial lines and across institutional types.

Traditionally, the Technikons awarded a variety of career-focussed qualifications concentrating on the application of existing knowledge, skills and procedures (typically National Certificates and National Diplomas), and Universities awarded some undergraduate certificates and diplomas, but mainly degrees at the level of Bachelor (3 year), Honours Bachelor (Bachelor + 1year), Master and Doctor.

The entry point into the undergraduate qualifications for both types of institution is set at the level of the Standard 10 (Grade 12) certificate, which is based on

externally examined and moderated (at provincial level) examinations. Grade 12 (also referred to as "Matric") is the standard school-leaving level qualification in South Africa. Broadly speaking, Technikons have accepted a pass in Grade 12, while Universities have required a certificate of "Full Matriculation Exemption", which requires certain school subject combinations and has a higher minimum pass mark.

Since the early 1990s, Technikons have been permitted to award the degrees up to the doctoral level (these are designated the BTech, MTech and so on). Despite these moves, the ranges of qualifications offered by the two types of institution have continued to be viewed separately, and articulation across the two systems has been difficult.

Movement within institutional types is also complicated because of the different status associated with groups of institutions. The more established institutions (typically the "Historically Advantaged Institutions" or HAIs) generally are seen to have a higher status then others (typically the "Historically Disadvantaged Institutions", or HDIs). This "pecking order" also exists within these institutional groups, and is manifested in the fact that nominally equivalent qualifications are accepted more readily from some institutions than from others, both in the employment market and in admission to higher degrees.

Finally, much of the post-school learning for many South Africans is received in the form of "in service" or "industrial" training, which falls under the Department of Labour. This training has been viewed and managed entirely separately from the offerings from the University and Technikon sector (falling under the Department of Education).

3. A Unified Qualifications Framework for Higher Education

The concept of a National Qualifications Framework emerged prior to the 1994 democratic elections, but was given substance in the National Training Strategy and the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). It was regarded as a major innovation of the new democratic government, aiming to bring all learning, including basic, secondary and higher education and the various forms of "in service" and industrial training under a single framework of outcomes-based standards and qualifications. The SAQA Act was passed in 1995, with the joint sponsorship of the Ministers of Education and Labour.

The 1997 White Paper on Education in South Africa outlined a set of initiatives aimed at transforming higher education into a single, coordinated system, including a programme-based approach, facilitation of articulation and increased facility for the recognition of prior learning.

Two of the bodies that have been largely responsible for putting these initiatives into practice are the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and the SAQA.

The CHE is an independent statutory body established in May 1998 in terms of the Higher Education Act, No 101 of 1997, and the White Paper: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education of 1997. Its main responsibilities are:

- To provide independent advice to the Minister of Education on a range of issues including academic policy, access to higher education, funding policy and the size and shape of the higher education system and
- To design and implement a system for quality assurance in higher education, and establish the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC).

(Source: The Mission and Responsibilities of the CHE, CHE Website:www.che.org.za)

SAQA is a body of 29 members appointed by the Ministers of Education and Labour. The members are nominated by identified national stakeholders in education and training. The functions of the Authority are essentially twofold:

- To oversee the development of the NQF, by formulating and publishing policies and criteria for the registration of bodies responsible for establishing education and training standards or qualifications and for the accreditation of bodies responsible for monitoring and auditing achievements in terms of such standards and qualifications and
- To oversee the implementation of the NQF by ensuring the registration, accreditation and assignment of functions to the bodies referred to above, as well as the registration of national standards and qualifications on the framework. It must also take steps to ensure that provisions for accreditation are complied with and where appropriate, that registered standards and qualifications are internationally comparable.

Source: (SAQA Website: www.saqa.org.za)

SAQA began work in 1997 and the NQF was established by regulation in 1998. Substantial debate and contestation has surrounded the NQF, and the associated responsibilities and authorities in the areas of standards generation, quality assurance and accreditation. This was to be expected, given the ambitious aim of the NQF; that of bringing all learning, from foundation education, to doctoral degrees, under a single umbrella framework.

4. The National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education

During late 2001 and early 2002, two complementary documents were released for comment:

- The CHE released a document entitled: A New Academic Policy for Programmes and Qualifications in Higher Education (January 2002). The New Academic Policy is often referred to by its acronym, NAP, and
- SAQA released a document entitled: Development of Level Descriptors for the National Qualifications Framework (December 2001).

These documents explained the purpose and scope of the new academic policy within the changing context of higher education in South Africa, and presented the proposed framework for qualifications in higher education.

The NQF itself can be represented as a grid, as shown overleaf. The diagram shows the upper five levels of the NQF; the full NQF consists of eight levels, the first four of which cover basic and secondary education. Levels 5 to 8 cater for higher education. The FETC, shown at level 4 on the diagram, is the Further Education and Training

Certificate, which would be at a level equivalent to the existing Grade 12 (Standard 10) certificate. Further notes about the NQF follow below.
Please click here to see Figure 1: A Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (Only Levels 4 to 8 shown). Source: A New Academic Policy for Programmes and Qualifications in Higher Education (CHE, January 2002)

4.1. Location of Qualifications and Programmes on the NQF

Associated with each level (and sub level in the case of level 8) on the NQF is a set of "Level Descriptors". These are broad, generic qualitative statements against which learning outcomes can be compared, and the offering located at the appropriate level on the qualifications framework. SAQA has prepared draft level descriptors for the NQF levels and sub levels.

More specific outcomes achieved by particular qualifications complement the level descriptors, and differentiate between different qualifications at the same NQF level. The increasing specificity of the descriptors is represented in the "nesting " principle, in which the level descriptors are complemented by qualification descriptors for each qualification type. Within each qualification type, designated variants occur (for example, the BSc, BCom and BA are designated variants of the Bachelors degree at L7 of the NQF). The final layer is the qualification specialisation (for example, a BSc in Geology). The nesting principle is illustrated below.

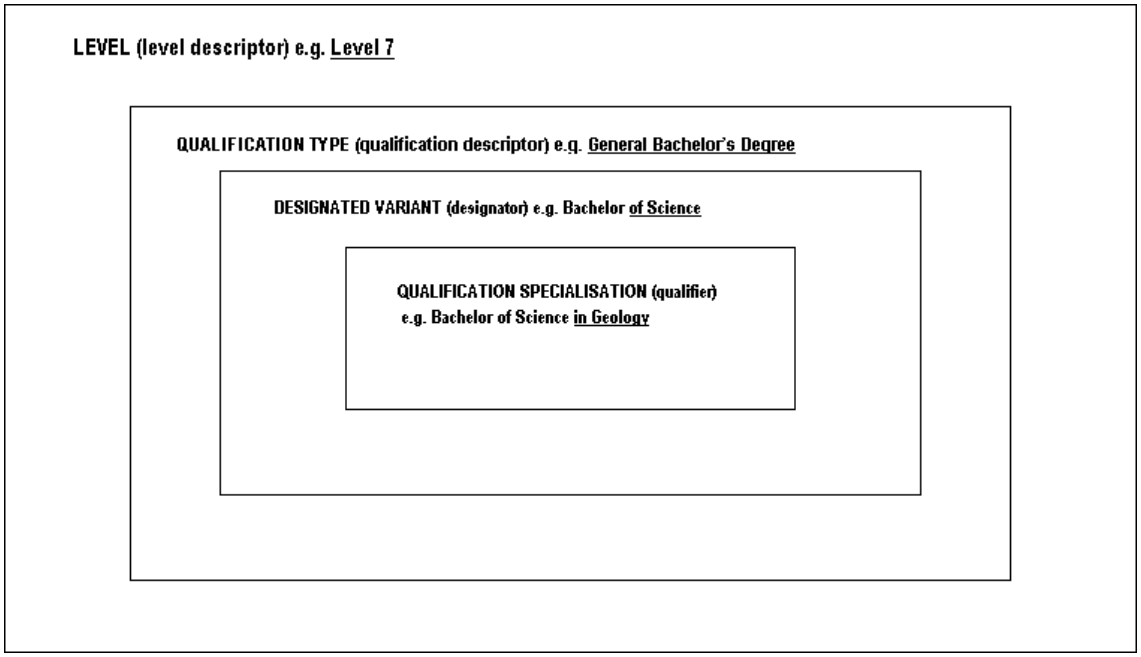

Figure 2: The "Nesting" Principle. Source: Development of Level Descriptors for the NQF (SAQA, December 2001)

4.2. A Uniform Credit System

The "size" of qualifications on the NQF is measured in credits, where one credit represents ten notional hours of learning. This time goes beyond contact time, and includes time spent out of the classroom, such as assimilation time. The proposed credit totals on the NQF diagram are based on the following general guidelines:

- For undergraduates, a 40 hour week, with 30 weeks per academic year (thus 1200 hours, and 120 credits per year on average) and
- For graduates, a 40 hour week, with 45 weeks per academic year (thus 1800 hours, and 180 credits per year on average).

These are general guidelines; it is possible to offer whole qualifications with fewer than 120 credits in total. The credit totals indicated on the NQF diagram are intended as minimum values. The South African Universities vice-Chancellors Association (SAUVCA) has, in its consolidated response to the NAP and Level Descriptor documents (identified at the beginning of Section 4), highlighted the fact that the key criterion differentiating between the vertical NQF levels is "complexity of learning", rather than time. Therefore, as indicated on figure 1, the level at which a qualification is registered depends not only on its containing sufficient credits, but also on a prescribed minimum number of these credits being at the appropriate level.

4.3. Vertical and Horizontal Articulation

The NQF in its current form presents two main vertical "tracks"; a General track and a Career-focused track, each of which would contain a set of qualification types across the NQF levels. The Career-focused track is not intended to be a purely technical one, and would accommodate qualifications such as the Bachelor of Business Science in Actuarial Science (an advanced, career-focused Bachelor's Degree at level 8, sublevel PG1). This does away with the "separate spheres" of qualifications for universities on one hand and Technikons on the other, as both types of institution could offer programmes from the General and the Career-focused tracks. Movement across the General and Career-focused tracks is to be facilitated by an articulation column, supporting both horizontal (at the same level) and diagonal (moving across and upwards) articulation, either by specified articulation credits or an articulation qualification. It should be noted that institutions would, as the system is currently envisaged, retain the ability to specify entrance requirements to their programmes.

5. The Implementation of the NQF in Higher Education

The implementation of the NQF for the Higher Education sector can be considered to have begun in mid-1998, with the interim registration of existing qualifications with SAQA, according to the provisions, definitions and procedures developed by SAQA and its supporting structures. This has been an iterative and somewhat inexact process, since the structures themselves are still in the process of being set up and their responsibilities defined. The following sections outline the main supporting structures, and describe the registration process thus far.

5.1. Structures Supporting the Implementation of the NQF

Some of the major structures supporting the implementation of the NQF are:

- **National Standards Bodies** (NSBs) are bodies registered in terms of the SAQA Act, responsible for establishing education and training standards or qualifications, and to which specific functions relating to the registration of national standard sand qualifications have been assigned. There are twelve NSBs, one for each of the "organizing fields" established at the outset of the NQF process.
- **Standards Generating Bodies** (SGBs) are formed by education and training stakeholder interest groups within the organizing fields. An SGB is registered with the appropriate NSB. The SGB has the key task of generating standards (these could be unit standards as is typically the case in the industrial training sector, or whole qualification standards, which is the route preferred by the universities). These standards move, via the relevant NSB, to SAQA for registration. The number of SGBs per NSB varies considerably; there are roughly 100 registered SGBs in total at present.
- **Education and Training Quality Assurance Bodies** (ETQAs) are bodies accredited in terms of the SAQA Act, responsible for monitoring and auditing achievements in terms of national standards and qualifications. The nature of the ETQA tends to depend on the educational sector concerned. It might be a professional body, such as the Engineering Council of South Africa (ECSA), or a Sectoral Education and Training Authority (SETA), typically the case for industry-specific training such as forestry or mining. In the case of Higher Education, it is the HEQC of the CHE.

5.2. Registration of Higher Education Qualifications

Since standards generation will take some time to complete, a process of interim registration of all existing qualifications was begun in June 1998 so as to place these qualifications within the outcomes-based framework of the NQF. This amounts to the creation of an "inventory" of existing qualifications offered by tertiary institutions. Interim registration is valid until 30 June 2003.

Meanwhile, SAQA has directed the NSBs to review all interim-registered qualifications by July 2002, in order to determine whether the qualifications should be registered for a further three years, referred to an SGB, or discontinued.

The introduction of new qualifications must take place with the involvement of the relevant SGB, before being forwarded to the NSB for recommendation to SAQA for registration on the NQF. By June 2002, 64 new qualifications had been registered.

6. Conclusion

The creation and implementation of the NQF is an enormous, complex and ambitious undertaking. It takes place against a background of other substantial changes in the education system, including the restructuring of public higher education institutions and the introduction of a new funding mechanism for public Higher Education. The Report of the Study Team on the Implementation of the National Qualifications Framework, released in May 2002, highlights among others, the mammoth tasks that lie ahead in the areas of standards generation and quality assurance.

The Inter-NSB forum in its reaction to this report identifies the need for a simplification of the machinery and processes involved in the implementation of the NQF as well as the need for adequate dedicated funding for the implementation process. These views are shared by SAUVCA.

It is thus clear that, while all players recognize the importance of the NQF and support its implementation, there are several issues to be resolved. These relate both to the mechanism of implementation, and to the fundamental structure of the NQF. Examples of changes that have been suggested include:

- The expansion of the NQF to a ten-level framework, to allow better differentiation among the higher degrees that are currently accommodated in level eight,
- Substantial rationalisation of the NSB and SGB structures and
- A simplified quality assurance mechanism, enabling providers to work through a single ETQA rather than "field-specific" ETQAs.

Further Information

Further information about the South African Higher Education system, and the progress of the implementation of the NQF, is available from the websites of SAQA and the CHE. This information includes:

- A list of approved university qualifications (available from the CHE website),
- A list of approved technikon qualifications (available from the CHE website) and
- A list of registered private institutions, with a list of their approved programmes.

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