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Spotlight on SAESI Qualifications

Background;

The status of the SAESI Qualifications is under probe in the City of Tshwane after the trade union SAMWU wrote to the Executive Mayor questioning a Senior Executive appointment who it is alleged in his CV claimed that the SAESI Advanced (Associate) Diploma was at NQF 7 level.

Subsequent to this publication an internal correspondence was directed to all prescribed officers to route all queries in this regard to the Office of the President.

The oversight and mandate of aligning the SAESI qualification remains delegated to the Presidency and the adhoc board Task Team since 2013.

Discussion/Deliberations/ Response

The Issues ventilated within the print media calls to public and questions the Propriety of the SAESI Qualifications and whether or not it is registered with the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) on the National Qualification Framework (NQF) and whether or not the SAESI member misrepresented his qualification relationship against the NQF Level in his job application. The latter probe falls outside the scope of this response and remains an issue between the employer and the applicant.

It may however be of importance to strengthen member knowledge and public perception on the origins and true value of the Occupational Qualifications within the world of work.

Where does the challenge really originate from?

The Presidency recognises that although these challenges were raised by the trade union the South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU), the agitation is prompted by a splinter group of members who are organised by faculty staff from the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT), venturing to establish a private business by purporting that qualifications outside the academic realm are invalid, improper and illegal and must be shut down so that it may further its ambitions to monopolise the environment from a perceived superior academic realm. Formal meetings requests by SAESI with the strategic level of TUT remain outstanding.

Impacts, Influence and Response

The Presidency has since 2015 presented itself before SAQA, the Council of Higher Education (CHE) and the Quality Council for Trade and Occupations (QCTO) to answer to the above claim that SAESI is providing illegal qualifications.

The Presidency has put on record a twelve (12) page response with a seventy one (71) page supporting bundle of documents before SAQA which confirms that SAESI is not an education service provider but a Quality Assurance Body and an IFSAC Certifying entity.

The sector demands and the contribution made by the South African Fire Service Institute (SAFSI) in the National Sphere.

The demand for the qualifications originated within the Fire Brigade Services Act 99 of 1987 by the dominant municipal sector employer represented by SALGA as a member on the Fire Brigade Board (FBB).

SAFSI registered six (6) occupational qualifications in 1983 with the Bureau for Research Support Services (BRSS). SAFSI forged an academic relationship with the Technikon Pretoria in 1992.

These qualifications were condensed to five (5) levels in 1995 which was reassessed by the Human Science Research Council (HSRC). SAFSI continued its academic relationship

SAFSI as a member of the FBB presented these qualifications which were accepted by the Fire Brigade Board (FBB) as the prescribed benchmarked standard applicable for the dominant municipal employer to appoint a chief fire officer and a member of the service in terms of section 5(1) and 6(1) of the Fire Brigade Services Act.

These qualifications became entrenched in the job descriptions, progression and promotion and remuneration of fire fighters within the municipal fire services regulated through the South African Local Government Bargaining Councils (SALGBC) and was represented by the trade unions as parties with SALGA representing the various municipal employers.

These qualifications have also been voluntarily accepted by the industrial, petroleum, aviation, marine, military sectors responsible for fire and emergencies.

SAFSI in satisfying the sector demand for distance learning entered a partnership with National College Limited (NCL) trading as Success College to provide distance learning in 1994. The academic partner Technikon Pretoria was included in the agreement.

SAFSI transitioned into the Southern African Emergency Services Institute (SAESI) and extended its footprint into the Southern African as the sole certifying entity of IFSAC for the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) proficiency programs provided by municipal and private training centres. The NFPA remain the global standards used in over one hundred (100) countries which are regulated by IFSAC Certifying Entities.

This partnership between SAFSI and NCL progressed from 1995 until 2003 and The Agreement was terminated by notice of NCL citing non-viable market and a phased out transfer of the intellectual property owned by SAFSI was handed back to SAESI.

The reasons for departure involved voluntary participation and poor income generation for NCL and most importantly the difficulty for NCL to Present SAFSI property for registration before SAQA. The changing political and legislative landscape resulted in the FBB becoming dysfunctional and thereafter not constituting leaving SAESI with limited options.

In the meantime the academic partner Technikon Pretoria in 2003 registered its own Fire Technology qualification with SAQA namely the; The National Higher Certificate at NQF 5 (Gr12+2 @240 credits), The National Diploma NQF 6 (Gr12+3 @ 360 credits) and The B-Tech at NQF 7 (Gr 12+4 @ 480 credits). These qualifications were registered as full time study programs.

SAESI continued relations with the Technikon Pretoria who transitioned to Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) and served on its advisory board and established a pathway for SAESI members to progress with their occupational qualifications vertically in to the NQF through the TUT.

Members entering the field of study realised that the academic curriculum within the faculty of science was misaligned by admitting a fire-fighter and turning out a chemist who becomes unsuited to the world of work.

The anticipated influx was confined to the privileged members located within and around the Gauteng Province whilst majority members still had and have no reasonable access.

SAESI has established many Task Teams to seek redress over the years and realised the mandate cannot be achieved in its current construct without becoming a registered university to bring an application before SAQA.

The members were resolute not to utilise member funds to start a business, and deal with the complications of starting a business whilst being employed within the municipal sector.

SAESI has advocated for many years post 2000 with NDMC to resurrect the FBB or for a National Fire College to be established. SAESI also advocated with TUT to provide distance learning and promises made have not been met to meet the sector needs.

The above facts forced a member driven non-profit institution expelling its own capital to sustain the inherited prescribed occupational qualifications in Fire Technology to ensure that the fire and emergency services remain sustained and does not collapse whilst its members from 11 branches situated around 28 training centres employed within the 283 established municipalities queue outside TUT for full time admission whilst drawing a public salary's.

The Presidency also recognises with concern the political pressure and restraints imposed on SAESI office bearers over a period of time from participating in SAESI activities to the extent that employment contracts of Past Presidents have not been renewed, Office bearers and members were withdrawn from attending the 31st SAESI Conference, the reduction of the Provincial funding commitment to the conference by 50%, and the removal of financial support for member travel and time-off to name a few. The SALGA MOU seeks to address this issue.

The economic reflection of the decision by members not to divert from the business practice of a quality assurance and certification body to a becoming an education service provider translates to members subsidised by the dominant employers to access credible occupational qualifications at approximately 10 Percent of the costs levied by the institutions of higher learning.

Notwithstanding these orchestrated challenges by an undisclosed number of anti SAESI members, SAESI has made significant contributions towards stimulating the economic activity by hosting six consecutive conferences within the Gauteng Province and also invested in infrastructure to establish the SAESI HOUSE to serve as a business hub which is accessible to stakeholders.

SAESI in the Current Landscape

SAESI is legally constituted as a non-profit company with an adopted Memorandum of Incorporation (MOI) which is governed by its 2nd Board of Directors and is registered with the Companies and Intellectual Property Commission (CIPC) since 2014 and have in place the mandatory board committees for Nominations and Audit and Risk having independent Chairpersons.

SAESI has also concluded a partnership agreement with the LG SETA as the Assurance Quality Partner (AQP) for the NQF 4 registered Occupational Certificate: Fire-fighter (98991) and are facilitating the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) project identified in the National Skills Strategy 3 to RPL between 80 and 100 members initially as a Pilot, to migrate into the new NQF 4 Occupational Qualification.

SAESI is recognised as the Community of Expert Practitioners (CEP) by the QCTO and will included in all future qualification development within the sector.

SAESI is recognised as a Professional Body (PB) by SAQA and is also authorised to regulate the "right to practice" by awarding the registered professional designation Fire-fighter Practitioner of South Africa [FFP (SA)].

SAESI is recognised and empowered by the NDMC Fire Services Directorate and have a strong working relationship making representations on all relevant platforms and the occupational qualification is contained in the Municipal Staff Regulations (MSR) of 2016.

SAESI is recognised as a strategic partner of the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) and has launched a Memorandum Of Undertaking (MOU) that is under review which once accepted will mitigate the hurdles experienced within the municipal sector.

SAESI has grown to become the largest IFSAC Certifying Entity that has voting rights outside of the United States of America that empower its twenty eight (28) accredited municipal and private training centres in the provision of seventy (70) NFPA programs that are in high demand within the sector.

What is SAESI Doing Currently for member benefit?

SAESI is working closely with the Key Stakeholders to professionalise the sector by regulating the right to practice and developing further occupational qualifications that promotes lifelong learning in line with SAQA policies that will be registered within the QCTO sub-framework.

The formation of the CEP is therefore of critical importance for development that includes the external stakeholder involvement within the projected three (3) year target to finalise the development and registration of the NQF 7 level qualification with exit levels at NQF 6 and NQF 5 levels that incorporates the occupational curriculum.