

The National Qualifications Framework: An Introduction

Mr Japie Nel
Senior Manager: Registration and Recognition
South African Qualifications Authority

1. Introduction

The development of National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) has been a major international trend in reforming national education and training systems since the late 1990s. The initiative in South Africa started in the late eighties and early nineties and culminated in the establishment of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) through the SAQA Act, Act 58 of 1995. SAQA established an eight-level NQF in 1998. The NQF was subjected to ongoing reviews which eventually lead to the implementation of the NQF Act, Act 67 of 2008 that replaced the SAQA Act. The eight-level NQF was replaced with the ten-level NQF.

The NQF has been discussed and with much enthusiasm, but it may be questioned whether the NQF is well understood by employers, employees, learners and in many cases by designated members of recognised professional bodies.

This article is not an attempt to provide a scientific paper, but to provide readers with information about the NQF and will form part of a series of discussions of important areas around the development and implementation of the NQF.

2. The concept of the National Qualifications Framework

The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) is a comprehensive system for the classification, registration, publication, and articulation of quality-assured national qualifications. It describes the types of qualifications and their levels and credits within three co-ordinated qualifications sub-frameworks. It is a single system that describes the interrelationships of the qualifications and progression from one level to another.

The NQF is designed to provide quality-assured, nationally recognised qualifications that are supported by a quality assurance system which ensures that qualifications are issued only to those individuals who have met the standards, no matter how the standards have been achieved.

As mentioned above, qualifications are awarded at defined levels on the NQF, and it shows how a learner can progress from one level to another or from one qualifications sub-framework to another.

It should be noted that there is a difference between a national qualifications framework and a national qualifications system. Where the qualifications framework provides a framework of qualifications on various levels, the qualifications system (NQF ecosystem) includes all aspects of activities that result in the recognition of learning. These systems include the development of qualifications, institutional arrangements, quality assurance processes, assessment and awarding processes, skills recognition and other mechanisms that link education and training to the labour market and civil society.

The NQF ecosystem is shown in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1: The NQF Ecosystem



3. The Context of the NQF in South Africa

SAQA is since 1995 the custodian of the NQF, and is, amongst others, mandated by the NQF Act to oversee the further development and implementation of the NQF and ensure the achievement of its objectives.

The functions of SAQA are set out in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Functions of SAQA



3.1 Objectives of the NQF

The objectives of the NQF are to:

- Create a single integrated national framework for learning achievements;
- Facilitate access to, mobility and progression within, education, training and career paths;
- Enhance the quality of education and training;
- Accelerate the redress of past unfair discrimination in education, training, and employment opportunities.

The objectives of the NQF are designed to contribute to the full personal development of each learner and the social and economic development of the nation at large.


4. Features of the NQF

The NQF has various features that include the various levels, qualification sub-frameworks with the three quality councils, the qualification types within each sub-framework as well as the credits for the qualification types on each NQF level.

4.1 Framework and Levels

The NQF is organised as a series of levels of learning achievements, arranged in ascending order from one to ten. Each level on the NQF is described by a statement of learning known as a level descriptor that provides a broad indication of learning achievement or outcomes that are appropriate to a qualification at that level. The ten-level framework with the qualification types is depicted in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3: The National Qualifications Framework



National Qualifications Framework		
Level	Sub-Framework and qualification types	
10	Doctoral Degree (360 Credits) Doctoral Degree (Professional)	
9	Master's Degree (180 Credits) Master's Degree (Professional)	
8	Bachelor Honours Degree (120 Credits) Postgraduate Diploma (120 Credits) Bachelor's Degree (480 Credits)	Specialised Occupational Diploma (120 Credits)
7	Bachelor's Degree (360 Credits) Advanced Diploma (120 Credits)	Advanced Occupational Diploma (120 Credits)
6	Diploma (360 credits) Advanced Certificate (120 Credits)	Occupational Diploma (360 Credits) Advanced Occupational Certificate (120 Credits)
5	Higher Certificate (120 Credits)	Higher Occupational Certificate (120 Credits)
4	National Certificate (120 Credits)	National Occupational Certificate (120 Credits)
3	Intermediate Certificate	Intermediate Occupational Certificate (120 Credits)
2	Elementary Certificate	Elementary Occupational Certificate (120 Credits)
1	General Certificate	General Occupational Certificate (120 Credits)

Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (Levels 5-10)

General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-Framework (Levels 1-4)

Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework (Occupational types across all levels)

4.2 Sub-Frameworks and Quality Councils

The NQF is a single integrated system for the classification, registration, publication, and articulation of quality-assured national qualifications comprising three co-ordinated qualifications sub-frameworks, each developed and managed by a quality council,

- a) The General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-Framework (GFETQSF) under the Quality Council for General and Further Education and Training (Umalusi) for qualifications on NQF levels 1 to 4;
- b) The Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) under the Council on Higher Education (CHE) for qualifications on NQF levels 5 to 10; and
- c) The Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework (OQSF) under the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) for qualifications on NQF levels 1 to 8.

5. Definitions

Level descriptors mean statements describing learning achievement at a particular level of the NQF that provides a broad indication of the types of learning outcomes and assessment criteria that are appropriate to a qualification at that level. The level descriptors indicate the degree of complexity of learning at a specific level.

Qualification Type means the classification of a qualification on a level within a Sub-Framework of the NQF.

Qualification means a registered national qualification. The national qualifications registered on the NQF are assessed in terms of the exit level outcomes and awarded and certified by the Quality Council or its accredited provider. It consists of a planned combination of learning outcomes with a defined purpose, intended to provide qualifying learners with applied competence and a basis for further learning.

The term **learning pathway** means sequencing of qualifications that allows learners to move vertically, diagonally, and in some cases horizontally, through NQF levels giving learners recognition for full or partially completed qualifications or part-qualifications. Learning pathways can also lead to professional designations when learning pathways include periods of structured work experience over and above qualifications.

The term **credit** means a measure of the volume of learning required for a qualification or part-qualification, quantified as the number of notional study hours required for achieving the learning outcomes specified for the qualification or part-qualification. One (1) credit is equated to ten (10) notional hours of learning.

6. Implications for the various role-players

6.1. Implications for Learners

The NQF informs learners of the nature of qualifications on the framework. It indicates recognised qualification types and pathways to higher levels of learning.

6.2. Implications for Training Providers

The NQF provides an indication of what qualifications can be offered by providers. Each qualification sub-framework has its own criteria for the offering of qualifications on its specific sub-framework and accreditation requirements for providers to offer qualifications. The credits provide an indication of the duration of a qualification.

6.3. Implications for Employers

The NQF shows at a glance the qualifications, and their various levels, and clarifies the purpose of each qualification. It shows employers what their employees need to attain to arrive at certain levels of education and training and it provides a useful tool around which they can develop their job descriptions.

6.4. Implications for Professional Bodies

The qualification registered on the NQF provides a good basis for professional bodies to identify the required underpinning knowledge and or experience needed to award a professional designation. Professional bodies also play a role in the professional competencies that should be included in the qualification.

7. Summary

As indicated, this article attempts to provide some clarity about the NQF. Follow-up articles will deal more with underlying qualifications for professional designations. It should be noted that there is a list of definitions available in the SAQA policies that need to be considered to ensure consistent reference to specific terms.

I am looking forward to continuing with the articles as part of continued discussions on and about the NQF.