

The Last Word

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Questions, queries, quibbles and quarrels: The SAQA experience

ABSTRACT

The South African Qualifications Authority was promulgated by enabling legislation through the SAQA Act (59 of 1995). The mandate of SAQA is quite simply to establish and maintain the National Qualifications Framework or NQF. This is a structure derived after study and investigation of a number of similar systems internationally, especially in the USA, UK (more specifically Scotland), Australia and New Zealand. Note that all the countries used as exemplars are developed countries. The philosophy underlying this process emanates from the avowed intention to shift thinking from education for employment to education about employability – to be effected via the critical cross-field outcomes, thus OBE. The upside of the process has been that SAQA has laudable aims and objectives and is democratic with a strong emphasis on relevance. Some serious hiccups in the system have led to the setting-up of the NQF Study Team being appointed to scrutinise the activities and functionality of the NQF, and to ensure that the work of SAQA be **streamlined and accelerated**. The SAQA structure as devised is not user-friendly to higher education institutions. The recommendation by the Study Team, that issues dealing with higher education should be transferred to the appropriate structures, is strongly supported. This would make it possible, for example, to have a more flexible and workable structure of qualifications and concomitant level descriptors.

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DECLARING AND DEFINING

The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA, sometimes pronounced with a loud click!) was promulgated by enabling legislation through the SAQA Act (59 of 1995). The mandate of SAQA is quite simply to establish and maintain the National Qualifications Framework, or NQF (“To ensure the development and implementation of a National Qualifications Framework which contributes to the full development of each learner and to the social and economic development of the nation at large” SAQA Mission Statement)². This laudable aim was further teased out by Mamphele Ramphela when she stated that “We need to discover how to build a system that focuses on excellence, that is accessible to all and promotes the development of the young into citizens who can build the country. We may share different backgrounds, but we are all human beings. By focusing on values, we can nurture talent” (The National Qualifications Framework – An overview, February 2000). In the same publication, Dr M Nkomo, the Chair of the SAQA Board averred that “We need system change, not just curriculum or pedagogic change, we need a new driving vision for our system, not just a new paradigm for curriculum design and delivery in the classroom; we need to accept the fallacy in some of the assumptions about education that exist in our society and realize that there are some new ‘truths’”. Sam Isaacs, the CEO of SAQA, rather floridly expounded that “We will make the NQF road by walking reflectively, accountably and boldly: reflectively by applying our minds; accountably by explaining the processes and decisions; boldly by giving leadership” (The National Qualifications Framework – An overview, February 2000, p. 19).

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Some rude remarks

The acronym NQF has elicited some unkind cracks, such as “No Quick Fixes”, “No Qualifications Forthcoming”, and the like. Some further words starting with Q have also been quite prominent – one is tempted to make **quips** about **quality**, to **quake** at the mere thought of writing more standards, to be in a **quandary** after some revocations and changes, to be absolutely sure that work has **quadrupled**, to want to **quash** any further initiatives associated with **quality** assurance, and to have a sinking feeling during an NSB meeting because once again there is no **quorum** and we are not going to reach our **quota of qualifications**! Let us hope that the powers that be can finally make the **quantum** leap to a system that works and that the plethora of acronyms will finally be reduced.

The upside of the concept and the process

The upside of the process has been that SAQA has laudable aims and objectives, as outlined above. It is democratic³ - "The SAQA Act is an example of enabling legislation – it does not hand down a blueprint from 'on high' but rather enables the development of the NQF as a social construct whose meaning has been, and will continue to be, negotiated by the people for the people" (The National Qualifications Framework – An overview, February 2000, p. 17). This is further underlined through the avowed intention to shift thinking from education for employment to education about employability – to be effected via the critical cross-field outcomes (thus outcomes-based education⁴). These outcomes, by way of reminder, are to:

- identify and solve problems in which responses display that responsible decisions using critical and creative thinking have been made;
- work effectively with others as a member of a team, group, organisation, community;
- organise and manage oneself and one's activities responsibly and effectively;
- collect, analyse, organise and critically evaluate information;
- communicate effectively using visual, mathematical and/or language skills in the modes of oral and/or written presentation;
- use science and technology effectively and critically, showing responsibility towards the environment and health of others; and
- demonstrate an understanding of the world as a set of related systems by recognising that problem-solving contexts do not exist in isolation.

In order to contribute to the full personal development of each learner and the social and economic development of the society at large, it must be the intention underlying any programme of learning to make an individual aware of the importance of:

- reflecting on and exploring a variety of strategies to learn more effectively;
- participating as responsible citizens in the life of local, national and global communities;
- being culturally and aesthetically sensitive across a range of social contexts;
- exploring education and career opportunities, and
- developing entrepreneurial opportunities.

Within this context, a number of SGBs have been created to deal with, for example, standards in the field of communication studies. There is the centrally important one for standards for the FET band, one for Audio-visual media production, for Journalism and for Government Communications (all of which cater for unit standards and for training in the workplace rather than in the formal sector). For the higher education sector, an SGB has been established to generate standards for the different universities

and technikons. In association with the SGB for the Generic and Formative BA, a fair amount of work has been done, but, and this leads one to the downside, this process has also been fraught with problems and hassles that have at times led to academics flatly refusing to be involved in a process that is so clearly not working well.

The downside of the whole process

With such clearly laudable intentions, why has it not worked better? Especially from the side of the universities a number of very real issues have bedeviled the engagement with SAQA over the past four years in ways that have left academics and tertiary managements angry, frustrated, rude and tearful in turn.

In facing the demands of the NQF and the Departments of Education and Labour, we have, as Wendy Kilfoil quite succinctly put it, been faced by the fact that “the matter is complicated by the fact that we have simultaneously to fit into the NQF and the new higher education requirements to ensure funding” (1999:16). All this has led to a virtual breakdown in certain areas, and in response to a generalised sense that the setting-up of the NQF was not progressing as it should⁹ a Study Team was appointed to scrutinise the activities and functionality of the NQF. Their brief is outlined in paragraph 1 of the Executive Summary of the Report: “The Study Team was given a clear brief by the Ministers of Education and Labour to recommend ways in which the implementation of South Africa’s National Qualifications Framework, established in terms of the SAQA Act, 1995, could be **streamlined and accelerated**”. This is a sobering document, and should be taken seriously – yet even though public comment had been solicited and had to be submitted by June 2002, the finalised report has not yet surfaced. This, together with the fact that the New Academic Policy Document, which is closely linked to the NQF Review, is also on hold adds immeasurably to irritation and frustration among those supposed to implement policies and procedures.

Some responses that I put together à propos of the NQF Review are the following:

It is felt very strongly that the NQF as a construct fulfils or has the potential to fulfil a very important role. It is therefore important that it should be developed optimally.

However, if the NQF is to function optimally the relationship between the Department of Education (DOE) and Department of Labour (DOL) and the relationship of these entities with SAQA should as a matter of utmost urgency be worked out as the **strongly adversarial relationship that exists at present is very problematic**. There would seem to be unequal power relations within this relationship, and this has led to a perceived lack of trust. It would seem as if the ministers and their departments are not adequately committed to, and involved in, NQF implementation.

This leads to a further problem: the problem of the virtual demonising of SAQA as a result of inadequate advocacy and a general lack of understanding among the general public of the role and functions of SAQA. The disappointingly slow implementation of the NQF has strengthened the impression that SAQA is not functioning optimally and is in fact a locomotive rumbling on towards an inevitable train smash.

Added to this there is the totally invidious situation that SAQA, that exists by virtue of South African legislation and fulfils a very important role in the transformation of education in the country and is crucial to the HR strategy of the country, should beg for money with which to implement its brief.⁶ The government should make available adequate funding for SAQA's operations so that the people entrusted with the implementation of the brief can do their work and not have to find (reluctant and contingent) donor funding.

The view of the Review team that the complex structure, complex regulations, policies and procedures, expressed in sometimes confusing language militate against smooth and rapid implementation is supported. Add to this the time-consuming and bureaucratic processes and the picture becomes more dismal. The system as it stands now is not sustainable and is not the best one to achieve the results hoped for.

Within the framework it is true, as the Review suggests, that leadership has been a problem. There has been confusion of roles and sometimes a lack of understanding, among leading figures, of the bigger picture, especially with regard to implementation and advocacy of the implementation.

The commingling of education and training and the incomplete understanding of the interface between them has had a negative effect on the implementation process. On p. 132 of the *NQF Review* there is reference to the "total insufficiency of provision for diversified skills development in the FET band, both present and projected, and also at the interface between further and higher education and training. We trust the NQF strategic partnership will increase the visibility of this need and mobilise support for it to be met". This is crucial.

It is strongly felt that there should be emphasis on the building of communities of trust and that providers, partners and users of the system should be equally benefited.

There is concern that rolling out a new system will inevitably slow down the process even further, and in this regard it is felt that any changes (possibly radical) should be made with a view to retaining the momentum that has in recent times been developing, so that the implementation can proceed.

So what are the main problems?

The structure as devised is not user-friendly to higher education institutions. The recommendation by the Study Team, that issues dealing with higher education should be transferred to the appropriate structures, is strongly supported. This would make it possible, for example, to have a more flexible and workable structure of qualifications and concomitant level descriptors.

The work involved in the development of standards should be done by paid professionals with inputs by the relevant academics – not by reluctant volunteers who have enough work to do anyway.

There is at present a serious policy overload – and apart from that, documents are not coming out of the discussion and comment processes. Therefore, decisions have to be taken on the basis of incomplete information and incompletely conceptualised and developed policies and procedures.

Quagmire or flowing stream?

Do we find ourselves in a quagmire or a flowing stream? As far as I am concerned, until more clarity emerges about the status of documents at present in various stages of comment, we are firmly stuck in a quagmire not of our own making, and might just be sinking – that gasping noise out there might just be the last gasps of academics before being sucked under.

References

Department of Education – Department of Labour. April 2002. Report of the Study Team on the Implementation of the National Qualifications Framework. Pretoria: Government Printing Works.

Kilfoil, Wendy. 1999. The comfort zone stops here: OBE, the NQF and higher education. *Scrutiny*2, 4(1):3-16.

Notes

¹ I have been a member of the National Standards Body 04 since the establishment of the system. I was nominated to the Body by the South African Translators' Institute – a critical Interest Group. I have therefore not been involved in SAQA directly via my university employment, but membership of the Body has been useful in my work environment in the sense that one knew firsthand what was going on. The first members were announced in the Government Gazette in August 1998. I was chairperson then and was re-elected chairperson in September 2001 for the second term.

² For all references to SAQA policy documents, see the SAQA website: www.saqqa.org.za

³ SAQA has chosen to run the setting of standards and the development of quality promotion by way of twelve National Standards Bodies consisting of a maximum of thirty-six members each. These Bodies

echo the twelve fields of learning and represent six social partners: State, Labour, Business, Providers, Critical Interest Groups and Community and Learners – unwieldy and cumbersome at best, ineffectual and frustrating at worst.

⁴ “Where did OBE come from? It has been around in the US since the 1960s, evolving from mastery-learning and competency-based education. It is also known there as performance-based education.” (Kilfoil, 1999:7.) A clear warning note is sounded by her when she says that “In New Zealand both secondary schools and universities have refused to have anything to do with OBE and it operates only in vocational training ... Universities argue that they are concerned with the intrinsic worth of knowledge and not with instrumental ends.” (Kilfoil, 1999:9.) She goes on to argue very cogently about the acceptance of the American model and its potential pitfalls.

⁵ A small further nail in the coffin of the present process aimed at setting up the NQF might well be the announcement that the permanent registration of qualifications (following the interim registration of 2000) will be postponed to June 2006 as SAQA, via the route of the NSBs and SGBs, does not have the capacity to deal with the permanent registration of thousands of qualifications submitted for interim registration.

⁶ SAQA has been dependent for a major part of its funding on funding from the EC and other donor agencies – this has had the effect that senior SAQA officials (both employees and board members) have been gallivanting overseas trying to secure funding rather than working at home to ensure the smooth implementation of this important educational activity.