

# Introduction to the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO)



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# 1. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

## **NQF review**

The aim of the review (which was initiated in 2001) was to investigate how the implementation of the NQF could be improved. Some notable successes and a number of challenges were noted. One concern was that there were too many bodies responsible for standards generation and quality assurance, which led to confusion and the duplication of work. Also, there was a need for the different approaches and practices within the education, training and skills development system to be accommodated. The design of the NQF architecture followed a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach and it became clear to all stakeholders that different kinds of learning in different contexts required different qualification types and quality-assurance models. The review revealed that, although there was agreement on the NQF principles, not all of these were reflected in practice.

## **Joint policy statement**

Following the publication of the review findings, the ministers of education and labour issued a joint policy statement in October 2007. This document outlined achievements to date and stressed the fact that South Africa’s NQF is integrated and includes all sectors and levels of education. The NQF objectives have received widespread support, and an awareness of the importance of outcomes-based education has been promoted.

The ministers also responded to the challenges that had emerged by agreeing to make provision for the establishment of three Quality Councils (QCs) to manage three subframeworks, one for Higher Education Qualifications, one for General and Further Education Qualifications and one for Occupational Qualifications. These subframeworks fall within a single National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and are managed in collaboration with the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA).



This provides an opportunity to explore new ways of working together and developing strong communities of trust.

## **New legislation and the establishment of the QCTO**

The Skills Development Act Amendment Bill introduces the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO), which will coordinate learning towards occupational competence within our national learning system. The council will be legally established by April 2009, with the aim of becoming fully functional by April 2010.

The Skills Development Act Amendment Bill will facilitate the development of a demand-driven occupational learning system that will provide relevant occupational skills (especially in terms of workplace experience) and be less bureaucratic. The QCTO will ensure that learning programmes can be developed to address specific scarce and critical skills needs. The legislation also allows for different kinds of learnerships, so that apprenticeships and internships can be accommodated and different learning routes can be selected.

The QCTO recognises the need for all occupational learning to build on general knowledge and theory, and provides for linkages and partnerships with both public and private provider systems. In order to fulfil its mandate, the QCTO will cooperate closely with SAQA, the other QCs and professional bodies.

## **2. WHAT IS THE QCTO?**

The QCTO will manage and coordinate the qualifications in the occupational qualifications framework in terms of their development, provision, assessment and impact. Its scope will be the development and quality assurance of fit-for-purpose occupational qualifications and unit standards as required by the labour market for work and employment purposes.

The QCTO will develop fit-for-purpose occupational qualifications that will be certificated as National Occupational Awards or National Skills Certificates. The awards will name the relevant occupation that the learner is now competent to practice. The focus of occupational qualifications will be the development of occupational competence which, in turn, contributes to increased employment rates and productivity.

The envisaged structure and functions of the QCTO reflect a new approach to quality assurance, in which quality assurance permeates all activities and is not seen as a separate function. This model was developed in response to appeals to bring qualifications development and quality assurance ‘under one roof’.

The quality assurance of the learning process for the QCTO’s qualifications can be visualised as a structure in which the roof is supported by two pillars: design and development on the one side, and the assessment of occupational competence on the other. The system is quality managed from the overarching ‘roof’, representing monitoring and evaluation through data analysis and research. This entire structure illustrates the quality-assurance model.

### **3. FROM DIFFICULTIES TO OPPORTUNITIES**

In addressing a number of NQF implementation problems, the QCTO provides an opportunity to find viable and powerful solutions, some of which are outlined below:

#### **A quality council that provides a framework for various role-players**

The many role-players and structures active in the labour market, such as SETAs, SGBs, providers, assessors and professional bodies, have created a situation that is overcomplex and inefficient. The QCTO provides a coordinating framework to support these role-players so that they can focus on what they do best and give coherence to these activities as a whole.

## **An improved qualification model that suits occupational learning**

Workers need to be competent in three areas of learning in order to be able to practise a particular occupation effectively, namely with regard to the –

- knowledge and theory component
- practical skills component
- work experience component.

The new model values each of these components equally. It differs from the previous qualification model in that it includes a structured work experience component.

## **A qualifications design process that is responsive to labour-market skills needs**

As a starting point, the new model analyses the relevant occupations as listed in the Organising Framework for Occupations (OFO), and identifies skills and tasks associated with each occupation and the kind and scope of work experience required to develop competence. This process results in occupational curricula and occupational qualifications that are directly linked to labour-market skills needs.

## **Curricula for guiding the creation of occupational learning programmes**

Each occupational qualification will be derived from an occupational curriculum. The purpose of the curriculum is to simplify and strengthen the development and assessment of the qualification. It specifies the inputs needed by unpacking the occupational profile, and will be used as the basis for the accreditation of providers and the approval of workplaces to offer the work experience component. It will

ensure that overlaps across qualifications are recognised, and this will assist learning programme design, materials development and learner mobility.

### **Reconceptualised unit standards that reflect the three forms of learning**

The outcomes are specified in unit standards reflecting each of the curriculum components already mentioned, namely knowledge standards, practical standards and work experience standards. Many of the more generic knowledge and practical standards will appear in a number of different qualifications. A minimum credit value will be set for unit standards to ensure meaningful units of learning.

### **Qualification Assessment Specifications for standardising assessments**

The QCTO will introduce an external, nationally standardised assessment for each of its occupational qualifications as a prerequisite for certification. A Qualification Assessment Specifications document for each qualification will specify the overall assessment strategy for the external assessment of occupational competence. It will also specify the criteria for the registration of constituent assessors and moderators, and the requirements for accreditation of assessment centres or registration of assessment sites where appropriate. This will put an end to the current variations in the interpretation of standards across sectors and sites.

The QCTO will appoint, or recognise, suitable organisations as quality partners in the design and management of these external assessments.

### **Revised rules of combination that reflect the differing requirements of different occupations**

Learners will have to demonstrate sufficient foundational competence in communication and mathematical literacy to cope with the occupational learning



demands and to benefit from the learning process. Additional language, mathematics or knowledge and theory requirements in other subject areas will be determined by the needs of each specific occupation and will be fit-for-purpose. These will be incorporated into the common/core learning requirements of the qualification.

The blanket, ‘fundamental’ requirements that existed before were time-consuming and often resulted in the accumulation of credits that were not relevant to the particular occupation. The new model thus removes a previous barrier and relates the educational requirements to the particular job.

‘Electives’ will be replaced by specialisations.

### **Multiple ETQAs combined in order to streamline quality-assurance processes**

The establishment of the QCTO will significantly increase the efficiency of the current ETQA system, merging twenty-three SETA ETQAs into one. This means that quality-assurance activities can be better coordinated and managed. All occupational unit standards will be quality assured by the QCTO.

### **A ‘light-touch’ accreditation process that promotes self-improvement**

Previously, there was an overemphasis on accreditation as the key to quality assurance. The QCTO will simplify the accreditation process, applying criteria which are stated in each curriculum and are fit-for-purpose for each qualification. The process will begin with self-evaluation and will promote quality improvement. Overlapping accreditation, registration and verification requirements – currently causing major delays and frustrations, and escalating costs (especially for small providers) – will no longer apply.

## **A balance between flexibility and standardisation in order to achieve credible qualifications**

The new model is flexible enough to maximise 'fitness for purpose', but includes sufficient standardisation to ensure the credibility of the system.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The new model aims to accelerate the processes for building occupational competence and to improve the quality and credibility of learner achievements. It defines clear learning pathways towards practice in an occupation in the actual workplace setting.

Its purpose is to improve the systems, processes and structures so that they will be more effective and efficient in addressing the skills crisis that is negatively affecting the achievement of South Africa's employment, productivity, economic growth and social goals.

It has been designed to ensure that the system is more responsive to labour-market skills needs. The labour market includes industry and all types of businesses, as well as the informal sector and the public sector.

Finally, its main contribution will be to strengthen the 'occupational arm' of the NQF in order to accommodate the unique learning requirements for building occupational competence. By strengthening this 'arm' of the NQF, the QCTO will provide an alternative pathway for young people and workers to access learning, work experience and employment.



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