

THE NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK (NQF)

What is the National Qualifications Framework (NQF)?

The NQF is a set of principles and guidelines providing a vision, a philosophical base and an organisational structure for a qualifications system. It is **national** since it embodies a national resource representing a national effort at integrating education and training into a **unified structure of recognised qualifications**. It is, thus, a framework of **qualifications** that records learner achievement. The NQF is the set of principles and guidelines by which records of learner achievement are registered to enable national recognition of acquired skills and knowledge, thereby ensuring **an integrated system that encourages life-long learning**.

Why the National Qualifications Framework?

When learners know that there are clear learning pathways providing access to - and mobility and progression within - education, training and career paths, they will often be more inclined to improve their skills and knowledge since such improvements will increase their employment opportunities. **The increased skills base of the workforce implies the enhancement of the functional and intellectual capability of the nation**. This increases South Africa's chances for success in the global community. Thinking has shifted from **education for employment** – developing **the ability to do a specific job** - to **education for employability** – developing **the ability to adapt acquired skills to new working environments**. The new education and training system must be able to support the notion of an adaptable workforce.

The objectives of the NQF

The objectives of the NQF, as outlined in the South African Qualifications Authority Act, 58 of 1995 ("the Act")¹, are to:

- Create an **integrated national framework for learning achievements**;
- Facilitate **access to, and 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**;
- **Contribute to the full personal development of each learner and the social and economic development of the nation at large**.

¹ Section 2 of the Act.

As the NQF is a means for **transforming education and training** in South Africa, it has been specifically designed to:

- **combine education and training into a single framework**, and bring together separate education and training systems into a single, national system;
- make it easier for learners to enter the education and training system and to move and progress within it;
- improve the quality of education and training in South Africa;
- open up learning and work opportunities for those who were treated unfairly in the past because of their race or gender; and
- enable learners to develop to their full potential and thereby support the social and economic development of the country as a whole.

The relationship between the NQF and outcomes-based education

The qualifications and standards registered on the NQF are described in terms of the specific **learning outcomes** that the qualifying learner is expected to demonstrate. Previously it was often true that the learning institution where a qualification was obtained was, in fact, more important than that which the qualifying students actually knew and could do. Learning institutions were able to decide arbitrarily to recognise, or not to recognise, qualifications attained at other learning institutions. The focus has now shifted to what the learner knows and can do rather than where the learner studied. While the traditional definition of knowledge emphasised language, especially through writing, an open process of communication, and formal and discipline-bound conventions, the new terminology urges higher education to allow the term knowledge to embrace **knowledge-through-action, particular outcomes of a learning transaction, and transdisciplinary forms of skill**. The NQF, thus, emphasises **applied competence** or the ability to put into practice in the relevant context the learning outcomes acquired in obtaining a qualification.

It is also recognised that there are many and varied sites of learning in contradiction to the old view that once an educational qualification was awarded the learning was over unless and until the learner registered for a new, formal qualification. This view is at odds with modern reality. Successful economies and societies must eliminate artificial hierarchies in social organisation, in the organisation and management of work, and in the way in which learning is organised and certified. More than ever modern society requires citizens with **a strong foundation of general education, the desire and ability to continue to learn, to adapt to and develop new knowledge, skills and technologies, to move flexibly between occupations, to take responsibility for personal performance, to set and achieve high standards, and to work co-operatively**. The outcomes of learning achievements must be clearly articulated if integration and coherence within the system is to be achieved so that access and portability can become a reality.

In accordance with the Act one of the functions of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) is to ensure that **standards and qualifications registered on the NQF are internationally comparable**². Since the global trend is moving towards describing qualifications in terms of achieved learning outcomes, the articulation of South African qualifications with their international counterparts is facilitated when they are described in terms of learning outcomes. This necessitates a systemic change in the nature of the education and training system to transform the way in which the education and training system works, how it is organised and the vision that drives participants within the system as they perform their own particular roles and functions.

Critical Outcomes

The Critical Cross-field Education and Training Outcomes, commonly known as the Critical Outcomes, are a mechanism through which coherence is achieved in the NQF³. The outcomes describe **the qualities which the NQF identifies for development in students within the education and training system, regardless of the specific area or content of learning, for life-long learning**. They have been identified by SAQA as follows⁴, 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;**
- **Demonstrate an understanding of the world as a set of related systems by recognising that problem-solving contexts do not exist in isolation.**

To contribute to the full personal development of each learner, and the social and economic development of the society at large, programmes of learning must make an individual aware of the importance of:

- **Reflecting on and exploring a variety of strategies to learn more effectively;**

² Section 5(i)(b)iv of the Act.

³ Critical outcomes are defined in regulation 1 of GN R452 of 28 March 1998 as: “[T]hose generic outcomes which inform all teaching and learning.”

⁴ See regulation 7(3) of Government Notice R452.

- 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.

NQF qualifications

The National Standards Body regulations⁵ indicate that a qualification must:

- Represent a **planned combination of learning outcomes which has a defined purpose** and which is intended to provide qualifying learners with **applied competence and a basis for further learning**;
- **Add value to the qualifying learner** by providing status, recognition, enhancing marketability and employability;
- Provide benefits to society and the economy;
- Comply with the objectives of the NQF;
- Include both specific and critical cross-field outcomes that promote life-long learning;
- Where applicable, be internationally comparable;
- Incorporate **integrated assessment** to ensure that the purpose of the qualification is achieved while **the assessments should include a range of formative and summative assessment methods such as portfolios, simulations, workplace assessments and also written and oral examinations**;
- Indicate in **the rules governing the award of the qualification** that the qualification may be achieved in whole or in part through **the recognition of prior learning**, which concept includes but is not limited to learning outcomes achieved through formal, informal and non-formal learning and work experience.

The regulations provide for the registration of qualifications constructed from unit standards as well as the registration of whole qualifications not constructed from unit standards. **Unit standard means registered statements of desired education and training outcomes and their associated assessment criteria together with administrative and other information** as specified in the regulations⁶. Both formats of qualification structure however require **the specification of learning outcomes**, the latter format requiring **the articulation of exit level outcomes and associated assessment criteria**.

⁵ See Chapter 3 of GN R452.

⁶ Regulation 1 of GN R452.

Consideration must be given to **the purpose of the qualification and how the qualification contributes to the learner’s development and further learning.** The notion of **applied competence** suggests that **foundational competence** (an understanding of what is being done and why), **practical competence** (a demonstrated ability to do a particular thing) and **reflexive competence** (a demonstrated ability to integrate or connect performance with the understanding of that performance so as to learn from the actions and adapt to change and unforeseen circumstances) are all necessary for the meaningful accomplishment of a task in any real world context. **Qualifications and standards are registered at specific levels of the framework and have a credit value.** Learners, in the course of study, may accumulate credits over time towards a qualification.

What the NQF looks like⁷

NQF Level	Band	Qualification Type
8	Higher Education and Training	• Post-doctoral research degrees
7		• Doctorates
6		• Masters degrees
5		• Professional Qualifications
5		• Honours degrees
		• National first degrees
		• Higher diplomas
		• National diplomas
		• National certificates
Further Education and Training Certificate (FETC)		
4	Further Education and Training	National certificates
3		
2		
General Education and Training Certificate (GETC)		
1	General Education and Training	Grade 9 ABET Level 4
		National certificates

⁷ See Chapter Two of GN R452.

Beneficiaries of the NQF

- **Learners** benefit from quality education and the provision of accredited qualifications enjoying national recognition and, where appropriate, international comparability;
- **Workers** benefit from the establishment of clear learning paths in the qualification structure that facilitate and support life-long learning and consequent career advancement;
- **Employers** benefit from a competent work force having the skills and attitudes required in the competitive global economy of which South Africa is a part;
- **Society** benefits from being part of a proud, learning nation that has the intellectual capacity to adapt swiftly to change and, especially, to technological change.
- The **nation** benefits from an integrated education and training system which acknowledges the achievements of all learners equally and supports the ideal of a learning nation.

The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA)

The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) came into being through the Act⁸ and is the body responsible for overseeing the development and implementation of the NQF. SAQA is appointed by both the Minister of Education and of Labour⁹. It has the following two-fold function, namely, to oversee the development and implementation 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
- **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 comparable¹⁰.**

The structures of SAQA

The **NQF standards setting and quality assurance** processes embrace two basic tenets, namely, knowledge, relevant for the current world, is created

⁸ Section 3 of the Act provides that: “There is hereby established a juristic person called the South African Qualifications Authority.”

⁹ See section 4 of the Act for the manner in which SAQA is constituted.

¹⁰ See section 5 of the Act.

through partnerships between and amongst varied groupings in society; and the national system of education must balance the need for quality education for all its citizens with the need for flexibility to cater for the wide-ranging circumstances that face learners and the wide-ranging options in what constitutes relevant education and qualifications i.e. a balance between society's needs and the needs of the individual.

The first of these tenets is addressed in **the structures that SAQA has in place**, while the second is addressed through **the NQF's commitment to outcomes-based education and training**. By describing national standards and qualifications in terms of learning outcomes through a participatory process, the NQF emphasises national demands in respect of quality. As the learning outcomes, standards and qualifications are clear this eliminates any doubt as to what is expected of qualifying learners.

SAQA has, by the creation of **Education and Training Quality Assurance bodies (ETQAs)**¹¹, recognised that **delivery of the standards and qualifications is the preserve of professional providers, learners and other key stakeholders in the field since different qualifications and standards make different demands on curriculum development and delivery, on assessment and teaching**. SAQA's ensures that **learners who are awarded a registered NQF-qualification or standard are able to demonstrate the learning outcomes of the qualification or standard in accordance with the described criteria and requirements**. ETQAs evaluate the learning programmes of different providers in a process of accreditation. This assures learners, and other users of the system, that any learner who has been deemed competent after participating in that learning programme has displayed the learning outcomes required for that qualification or standard.

SAQA has two 'arms', namely, **Standards Setting and Quality Assurance**. The sub-structures in the standards setting arm are the **National Standards Bodies (NSBs)**¹² and the **Standards Generating Bodies (SGBs)**¹³, while the sub-structures in the quality assurance arm are the **Education and Training Quality Assurance bodies (ETQAs)**¹⁴.

¹¹ Education and Training Quality Assurance bodies are established in terms of the provisions of Government Notice R1127 of 8 September 1998.

¹² See Chapter 3 of GN R452.

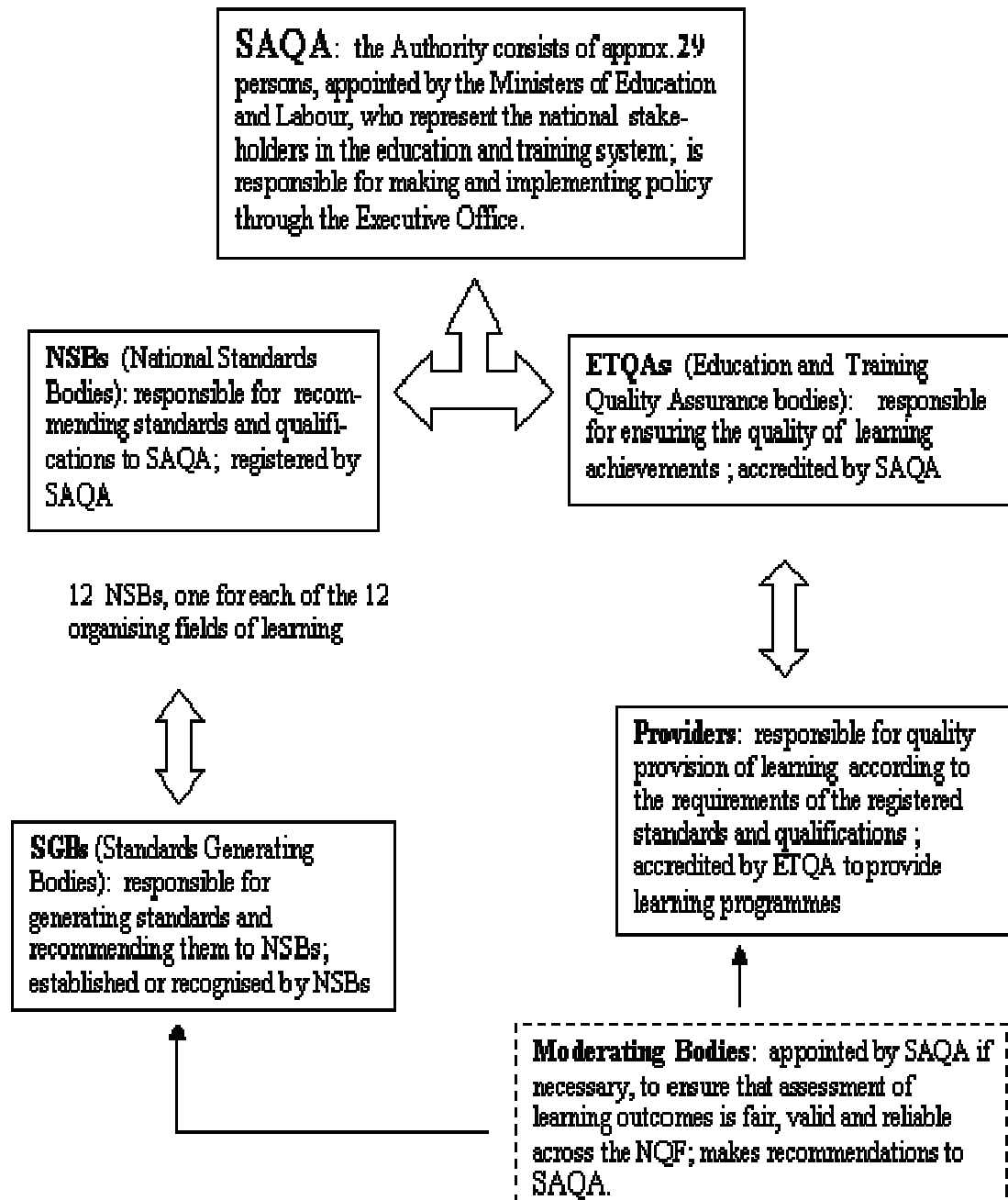
¹³ See Chapter 4 of GN R452.

¹⁴ See footnote 11 above.

This may be diagrammatically represented as follows:

Standards Setting

Quality Assurance



The functions of **National Standards Bodies** include¹⁵:

- Defining and recommending to SAQA the boundaries of the field and, within this, a framework of sub-fields;
- Recognising or establishing SGBs within the framework of sub-fields, and ensuring that the work of the SGBs meets SAQA requirements;
- Recommending the registration of qualifications and standards to SAQA;
- Overseeing the update and review of qualifications and standards;
- Liaison with ETQAs;
- Defining requirements and mechanisms for the moderation of standards and qualifications.

NSBs do not generate standards or qualifications but rather oversee these activities at the sub-field level.

The functions of **Standards Generating Bodies** include¹⁶:

- Generating standards and qualifications in accordance with the Authority requirements in identified sub-fields and levels;
- Updating and reviewing standards;
- Recommending standards and qualifications to NSBs;
- Recommending criteria for the registration of assessors and moderators or moderating bodies.

ETQAs do not set standards but, rather, assure the quality delivery and assessment of registered standards and qualifications. Furthermore an ETQA may not be a provider; its primary function is to assure the quality of provision and assessment of providers it has accredited.

Among the functions of an ETQA are the following¹⁷:

- to evaluate assessment and facilitation of moderation among constituent providers;
- to register constituent assessors in terms of the criteria established for this purpose;
- to co-operate with the relevant body or bodies appointed to moderate across ETQAs.

How quality in assessment is maintained

To prevent what is known as 'standards drift' SAQA has a number of checks and balances in place.

¹⁵ For their full functions see regulation 19 of GN R452.

¹⁶ For their full functions see regulation 24 of GN R452.

¹⁷ For their full functions see regulation 9 of GN R1127.

Every standard or qualification submitted for registration of the NQF must, thus:

- articulate the assessment criteria for the learning outcomes;
- stipulate the criteria for the registration of assessors of those outcomes, and
- indicate moderation options including the recommendation of a moderating or moderating bodies for those outcomes.

SAQA ensures that quality is a feature across the NQF

The objectives of the NQF **underpin the notion of quality in the new system**. Moreover the NQF supports a comprehensive quality cycle which includes standards setting and quality assurance. **Every standard and qualification before being registered on the NQF is measured against the principles enunciated in the objectives of the NQF, to ensure that it meets the criteria for an integrated qualifications framework that supports life-long learning**. In the same way, the foundation for national and international assurance of achievement of these standards rests upon the way in which they reflect these same principles and objectives.

The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)¹⁸

The NQF facilitates access to - and mobility and progression within - education, training and career paths and accelerates the redress of past unfair discrimination in education, training and employment opportunities. The dual purpose of RPL, thus, is to provide access to education and training and to redress past discriminatory educational practices. Prior learning can be recognised through appropriate forms of assessment which may include:

- interviews; and/or
- challenge examinations; and/or
- assignments or projects; and/or
- demonstrations of skills; and/or
- validation of previous qualifications; and/or
- a combination of the above.

The RPL process will usually entail the following:

- **identifying** the qualifications, unit standards or learning outcomes for which a candidate believes they will meet the requirements;
- **matching** a candidate's skills, knowledge and experience with the specific requirements;

¹⁸ Recognition of prior learning is defined in regulation 1 of GN R452 as: “[T]he comparison of the previous learning and experience of a learner howsoever obtained against the learning outcomes required for a specified qualification, and the acceptance for purposes of qualification of that which meets the requirements.”

- **assessing** a candidate using appropriate forms of assessment; and
- **crediting** a candidate for skills, knowledge and experience attained.

National Learners' Records Database (NLRD)

SAQA is responsible for the development and maintenance of a National Learners' Records Database (NLRD) that provides information about:

- SAQA and its sub-structures (NSBs, SGBs and ETQAs);
- Qualifications and standards registered on the NQF;
- Accredited ETQAs and their providers;
- Registered assessors;
- Moderating bodies;
- Individual learner achievements.

It will be able to provide policy makers with comprehensive information to enable informed decision-making.

The NQF AND SETAs

The acronym SETA stands for **Sector Education and Training Authority**. SETAs have been established to cover all sectors in South Africa. The functions of the different SETAs include:

- The development and implementation of sector skills plans;
- Registering and promoting learnerships;
- Applying to SAQA for accreditation as an ETQA for qualifications in its sector. As an ETQA the SETA will be responsible for the following quality assurance functions, namely:
 - Accrediting providers;
 - Promoting quality amongst constituent providers;
 - Monitoring provision;
 - Evaluating assessment and facilitating moderation among constituent providers;
 - Registering assessors;
 - Certifying learners;
 - Cooperating with relevant moderating bodies;
 - Recommending new standards or qualifications to NSBs or modifications to existing standards and qualifications;
 - Maintaining databases; and
 - Submitting reports to SAQA.

The Levy Grant system

Payment towards the levy grant scheme is legislated in terms of the **Skills Development Levies Act** and is designed to expand the knowledge and competencies of the labour force with resultant improvements in employability and productivity. Employers who participate fully in the scheme will reap the benefits of a better skilled and more productive workforce. Employers who initiate skills development projects in their organisations may also reclaim some of their expenditure on these initiatives.

Glossary

(as per NSB and ETQA regulations)

Accreditation	means the certification, usually for a particular period of time, of a person, a body or an institution as having the capacity to fulfil a particular function in the quality assurance system set up by the South African Qualifications Authority in terms of the (SAQA) Act
Applied competence	means the ability to put into practice in the relevant context the learning outcomes acquired in obtaining a qualification
Assessor	means the person who is registered by the relevant Education and Training Quality Assurance body in accordance with criteria established for this purpose by a Standards Generating Body, to measure the achievement of specified National Qualifications Framework standards and qualifications
Critical outcomes	means those generic outcomes that inform all teaching and learning
Education and Training Assurance (ETQA)	Quality Assurance body means a body accredited in terms of section 5(1)(a)(ii) of the (SAQA) Act. The body is responsible for monitoring and auditing achievements in terms of national standards and qualifications and to which specific functions relating to the monitoring and auditing of national standards and qualifications have been assigned in terms of section 5(1)(b)(i) of the (SAQA) Act
Exit level outcomes	means the outcomes to be achieved by a qualifying learner at the point at which he or she leaves the programme leading to a qualification

Integrated assessment	refers to that form of assessment that permits the learner to demonstrate applied competence and which uses a range of formative and summative assessment methods
Moderating Body	means a body specifically appointed by the Authority for the purpose of moderation
National Standards Body (NSB)	refers to a body registered in terms of section 5(1)(a)(ii) of the (SAQA) Act. The body is responsible for establishing education and training standards or qualifications, and to which specific functions relating to the registration of national standards and qualifications have been assigned in terms of section 5(1)(b)(i) of the (SAQA) Act.
Outcomes	means the contextually demonstrated end products of the learning process.
Primary focus	means that activity or objective within the sector upon which an organisation or body concentrates its efforts
Standards Generating Body (SGB)	refers to a body registered in terms of section 5(1)(a)(i) of the (SAQA) Act. The body is responsible for establishing education and training standards or qualifications, and to which specific functions relating to the establishment of national standards and qualifications have been assigned in terms of section 5(1)(b)(i) of the (SAQA) Act
Unit standard	means registered statements of desired education and training outcomes and their associated assessment criteria together with administrative and other information as specified in these regulations

ACRONYMS

NQF:	The National Qualifications Framework
SAQA:	The South African Qualifications Authority
ETQA:	Education and Training Quality Assurance body
NLRD:	National Learners' Records Database
NSB:	National Standards Body
SGB:	Standards Generating Body