SOUTH AFRICAN QUALIFICATIONS AUTHORITY

BUILDING TRUST: PROMOTING GENUINE QUALIFICATIONS IN AFRICA THROUGH EFFECTIVE VERIFICATION

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1   INTRODUCTION

Throughout the world individuals increasingly move from one place to another, exploring different and better opportunities to learn and work. Higher education allows them to educate themselves better, apply for better jobs, and as a result, achieve greater mobility. Qualifications are viewed as a proxy for the competence and skills they possess.

However, numerous studies and reports reflect that the education and training landscape is plagued by fraudulent activity all over the world. A UNESCO study undertaken in 2003 titled '*Combating Academic Fraud: Towards a Culture of Integrity*' warns that "any attempts to improve the functioning of the education sector in order to increase access to quality education for all cannot prove successful if problems of corruption […] are not being properly dealt with." (UNESCO, 2003) Within this context, the unbiased evaluation of qualifications for recognition has become more important than ever to promote and preserve genuine, quality qualifications.

In South Africa, recent media reports highlighted a few high profile cases of qualifications fraud. Although these are just a few cases, doing nothing about them could be construed as a breakdown in the quality assurance system that may diminish the value of qualifications for all.

Many perceptions exist about Africa as a continent ravaged by disease and poverty, in need of development and aid from outside. However, an analysis of the world's ten fastest-growing economies shows that African countries have reported average annual GDP growth percentages ranging between 6.8% and 8.1% since 2011. This growth in GDP is supported by new sources of capital investment in African development, and it is estimated that by 2050 one-quarter of the world's population will live in Africa. To harness this investment and develop the potential of African people, it would be necessary to ensure that they have access to qualifications of high quality that will hold value throughout the world.

These issues strengthen the absolute imperative for the African continent to ensure that the quality of its qualifications is above reproach. When a country offers high quality education or scarce skills programmes, it must be able to verify the quality of those qualifications. The process is based on verification – assessing whether the awarding institution and qualification are genuine, whether documentation is valid, and whether the person applying for verification is who he/she claims to be – but also about comparison, i.e. finding a corresponding qualification in the local context.

In 2013 SAQA developed a paper on combating qualification fraud for an international conference, highlighting 137 confirmed foreign qualification forgeries for the period between July 2012 and June 2013. While this figure represented less than 1% of the overall number of qualifications evaluated, current statistics reflect an increase in forgeries during the first four months of the 2014/2015 financial year.

Mobility, as understood in the revised Arusha Convention (to be launched in December 2014), is only possible if recognition systems exist and work optimally. There are various multi-lateral and bi-lateral agreements, conventions and accords in place. There are offices to ensure the evaluation of credentials and benchmarking to ensure parity of qualifications. There are quality assurance systems in place, and various national qualifications frameworks have been developed. The idea of world reference levels emerged from China in an attempt to recognise learning across the world.

Despite these agreements and systems, certain practices continue to work against the system. There are unscrupulous providers of unregistered and unaccredited providers; there are institutions offering unregistered or unaccredited qualifications, and a multitude of internet-based degree and diploma mills. There appears to be an

increase in unscrupulous verification agencies willing to vet non-existent qualifications for a fee, and syndicates selling fake certificates, fuelled by an ever-growing market. There are registered and accredited institutions that award unregistered qualifications, and institutions that use various unethical marketing ploys to increase their share of the market. In terms of examinations, fraudulent practices such as selling or leaking of question papers, ghost writing, mass copying, and marking fraud proliferate on a daily basis.

The challenge for all qualification evaluation bodies is to give and receive accurate and trustworthy information to dispel any suspicion of fraud while implementing a system able to respond quickly and efficiently to the needs of its users. A number of evaluation decisions remain on hold indefinitely because these bodies cannot access accurate and trustworthy information. Cases that cannot be resolved leads to frustration at many levels, but mostly affect innocent clients who are unable to work or study.

The vision is to build a credible, trustworthy network of public verification institutions on the African continent with central, on-line digital learner records databases providing fast and affordable services.

At a national level various counter-fraud strategies must be implemented, including:

- Broad-based public education;
- Increased focus on improved security features;
- A move away from paper-based to electronic verification;
- Improved legislation; and
- Set up and build strong international partnerships with peer evaluation agencies in other countries on the continent and worldwide.

The Seminar's main objective was to convince delegates to become signatories to a declaration that would commit them to reviewing their institutional arrangements and put in place innovative, affordable, fast digital verification mechanisms.

1.1   SAQA'S APPROACH TO CREDENTIAL EVALUATION

The process to evaluate foreign qualifications followed by SAQA is based on two inter-related phases, namely *verification* and *comparison*.

Verification is an integral part of the evaluation process, involving a range of checks to confirm:

1. The status of the institution that issued the qualification in the country of origin;
2. The status of the qualification in the country of origin;
3. The reliability of the qualification documents; and
4. The genuineness of the award – is the person presenting the application the person who attained the qualification.

Once a qualification has been successfully verified, a local equivalent must be found. The structure and outcomes of the foreign qualification is analysed to find its nearest South African counterpart, so it can be located within the South African National Qualifications Framework (NQF). SAQA proceeds to comparison only once the verification outcome is positive. If the verification outcome is negative, the evaluation is not pursued further.

A survey undertaken by SAQA in early 2014 identified various difficulties and challenges associated with the verification of qualifications. These included poor responses from foreign institutions; inaccurate or often invalid

contact details; unreliable mailing systems in countries where qualifications have to be verified; lack of trust and reliability; discontinued or fraudulent website domains, or no internet presence; inability to contact institutions by phone, in addition to prohibitive costs, incorrect numbers or faulty lines; identity fraud; no central office or hub to authenticate qualifications or educational institutions; difficulty in authenticating copies of certificates; provisional certificates which jeopardize fraud checks; inability to authenticate qualifications because many institutions do not maintain archives; countries in conflict or that experience political, social, economic or environmental turmoil; and high verification costs charged by some agencies.

Given these challenges, SAQA decided to host a seminar on 24 and 25 November 2014 that would bring together key stakeholders on the African continent to share experiences, learn from each other and foster closer cooperation among them.

1.2   OBJECTIVES, OUTPUTS AND OUTCOMES OF THE QUALIFICATIONS VERIFICATION SEMINAR

The *objectives* of the seminar were to provide a platform for the participating organisations to:

1. Develop a joint declaration to establish and govern structured relationships among participating countries to help combat qualification fraud on the continent;
2. Set up institutional arrangements between SAQA and recognised bodies that are responsible for the verification of learner records in countries on the African continent;
3. Develop innovative (including digital) and cost-effective means to verify qualifications.

The expected *outputs* of the seminar included:

1. At least 75% of participating countries would have signed the joint declaration;
2. At least 5 signed Service Level Agreements (SLAs) would have been put in place;
3. A clear, written follow-up/action plan has been developed;
4. There would have been agreement to hold a biennial conference of a similar nature to share experiences, lessons learnt and best practices in qualification verification.

The expected *outcomes* (short/long term) would be to:

1. Develop a robust understanding of verification within SAQA and its partner organisations;
2. Improve practice and products;
3. Ensure stronger cooperation and collaboration among African countries represented at the Verification Seminar;
4. Develop best practices in qualification verification;
5. Explore digital and cost effective means to verify qualifications.

1.3   PARTICIPATING COUNTRIES AND REPRESENTATIVES

SAQA decided to invite mainly English-speaking African countries from which more than 60% of evaluation applications in 2013/2014 originated to attend the SAQA Qualifications Verification Seminar. These countries included:

1. Botswana,
2. Cameroon (Bilingual),
3. Ethiopia,
4. Gabon
5. Ghana,
6. Kenya,
7. Lesotho,
8. Malawi,
9. Namibia,
10. Nigeria,
11. Swaziland,
12. Uganda,
13. Zimbabwe, and
14. Zambia.

Stakeholders invited to the seminar were sourced from credible and trustworthy institutions, national bodies, and federal, regional and provincial agencies.

Keynote speakers from the continent and beyond who had valuable experiences and expertise to share on this topic were invited to address the seminar.

Key South African national bodies and government departments invited to attend included:

1. The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET);
2. The Department of Basic Education (DBE);
3. The Council on Higher Education (CHE);
4. The Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training (Umalusi);
5. The Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO);
6. The Department of Home Affairs (DHA);
7. The International Education Association of South Africa (IESA);
8. Higher Education South Africa (HESA);
9. The Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO);
10. The South African Police Service (SAPS), and others.

1.4   VERIFICATION OF QUALIFICATIONS IN AFRICA: AN OVERVIEW

SAQA commissioned the North-West University to undertake an environmental scan of qualifications verification on the African continent, focusing on the policies and practices that support the verification of qualifications. 40 higher education institutions in Africa were randomly selected to find out how they deal with suspicious qualifications. The study found that although many policy documents existed, an electronic search identified only 5 African countries appearing to have procedures for the verification of foreign qualifications in place.

Although a high degree of trust between country agencies was highlighted as an essential component for the success of the process, the study identified a lack of structural arrangements to manage information in many countries. The study also identified a number of best practices, among them regulations to govern the evaluation process; involvement of law enforcement agencies; increased public education through the media; and working closely with partners to ensure quality qualifications.

The study team recommended further research into the minimum requirements for the effective functioning of a reliable, efficient, trustworthy and cost effective verification system. It further recommended that all countries on the continent should continue to share best practices and work towards a harmonized system to address challenges in qualifications verification.

1.5   CASE STUDIES, COUNTRY INPUTS AND PRESENTATIONS

Two case studies highlighting challenges and best practices from the qualifications verification processes in Kenya and South Africa were presented on day one. This was followed by a session where countries discussed challenges and best practices in groups. Presentations from the groups; on innovations and technological advances in document security; and on the Groningen Declaration – governing digital student data and its portability - followed on day two.

The challenges identified in the two case studies emphasised the lengthy, labour intensive and costly processes associated with qualifications verification. Both case studies highlighted inefficiencies that could be rectified very easily if there was closer collaboration and clearer communication between verification agencies. It was also agreed that verification agencies must be familiar with different global practices and take these into consideration when developing and applying their own policies and practices, to ensure global standards and consistency. In discussion, participants agreed that the costs associated with verification must receive attention.

In the general discussion, the Seminar heard that South Africa's Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr Blade Nzimande, had requested SAQA to investigate the possibility of maintaining a Qualifications Fraud Register. While the Minister's statement signals adequate political will to make such an intervention a reality, the severity and visibility of high profile cases often mean that the little transgressions occurring on a daily basis are overlooked. There was agreement that there should be an increased focus on the role of parents in instilling values in society as a whole, and that words like 'overstated' or 'misrepresented' should not be used to minimize the gravity of fraud.

Apart from educating the public about fraudulent qualifications, there was also agreement that the public should be informed about institutions that misrepresent their qualifications; 'degree mills'; and registered and accredited institutions offering qualifications that are not registered nor accredited. The intention is to embolden the public to report fraud, by giving them the reassurance that the system protects them. Both public and private sector employers should be encouraged to vet new applicants and scrutinise their qualifications as part of their risk management strategies.

A further challenge to the broader system related to the absence of consequences if people are found out. In South Africa in particular judicial processes are slow, and major cases are bungled because of inefficiencies in the system and inexpert people being given the responsibility to deal with cases. The possibility of discussing a possible amnesty period for qualifications fraudsters was mentioned. Seminar participants were encouraged to take the first steps to establish an inter-continental and inter-institutional collaboration agreement for genuine, verified qualifications. The need to think about innovations that could help streamline the work of verification agencies, allowing them to share reliable information quickly among each other to serve the needs of qualification holders, education institutions, employers and other stakeholders, was emphasised.

2 ESTABLISHMENT OF THE AFRICAN QUALIFICATIONS VERIFICATION NETWORK – A JOINT DECLARATION

At the end of the two-day Seminar, the attendees issued a joint declaration to establish an African Qualifications Verification Network.

Joint Declaration

Building trust and promoting genuine qualifications on the African Continent

We, the representatives from qualifications and quality assurance bodies, federal, regional and provincial agencies, and education and training institutions and national departments of higher education and training, have met in Pretoria, South Africa on 24 and 25 November 2014 to discuss and agree on the combating of fraudulent qualifications practices affecting the African continent. The purpose of the event has been to bring together key stakeholders on the African continent and set up a network for the verification of qualifications so that fraudulent practices can be countered by building formal trust relationships as well as innovative and effective processes, including the reduction of costs.

We note that:

- *Fraudulent qualification practices have increased worldwide as well as on the African continent;*
- *Networks for the verification of qualifications are increasingly being developed to combat fraud, and that this is currently lacking on the African continent;*
- *Digital repositories are becoming increasingly useful as a resource to combat fraud;*
- *Regional conventions, such as the Arusha Recognition Convention for the recognition of higher education qualifications in Africa (to be launched in December 2014), constitute important mechanisms through which a common approach to recognition can be developed;*
- *Learning outcomes constitute an important approach through which learning can be made more explicit, including the recognition of prior learning and foreign learning credentials; and*
- *National and regional qualifications frameworks are increasingly developed across the world and provide an important mechanism through which a common language and consistent approach to qualifications design and credential evaluation can be implemented, also on the African continent.*

We agree that:

- *An African Qualifications Verification Network (AQVN) be established based on the following principles;*
  - *AQVN will be a network supported by a Secretariat that will meet at least once per year in the form of an annual gathering to review its effectiveness. As far as possible such events will rotate between member states;*
  - *The main purpose of the AQVN will be to bring together key stakeholders and strengthen relationships on the African continent for the verification of qualifications so that fraudulent practices can be combated in a coordinated and effective manner;*
  - *Continuing professional development opportunities on qualification verification will be facilitated by the AQVN;*
  - *The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) offered to serve as the Secretariat for the initial two years, after which the decision will be reviewed;*

- o *The chairperson of the AQVN will be selected through an election process that takes place at the annual meeting;*
  - o *AQVN will build concrete links with other similar international networks;*
  - o *AQVN will work actively to gain support from the African Union and Regional Economic Communities in Africa, as well as from international agencies, governmental and non-governmental organisations.*

- *Bilateral and multilateral service level agreements (SLAs) between and amongst institutions and member states will be pursued to strengthen collaboration and counter qualification fraud on the continent. SLAs will be based on a jointly agreed format, which may be contextualised where necessary.*

We further commit to:

- *Expand participation in AQVN beyond the delegates present at the founding seminar;*
- *Collaborate to develop innovative ways and best practices for the verification of qualifications, including digital repositories and cost effective means to verify qualifications;*
- *Promote legislation to effectively deal with qualification fraud.*

Pretoria

25 November 2014