



# **NQF 2014 Impact Study: Summary Report**

## **Foreword by the SAQA CEO**

This summary report accompanies the release of the comprehensive 2014 NQF Impact Study Report which is a substantial document (more than 450 pages). This summary report offers an opportunity to celebrate the gains made since the NQF was launched in 1998. It is also intended as an appreciative interpretation, summary and resource for readers who are unlikely to access the substantial research report itself for a variety of reasons

This summary report highlights in a concentrated form, the activities of the NQF structures - SAQA, the three Quality Councils and the two national Ministries and Departments concerned with giving effect to the objectives and values of the NQF. The report highlights the positive trends as well as areas for improvement, to further advance and transform education, training and development in South Africa.

I want to acknowledge the excellent contribution and mammoth effort of the SAQA Research Director, Dr Heidi Bolton for leading and co-ordinating the research study and producing the comprehensive research report. I also want to commend the team who worked on the summary report under the able leadership of Dr Julie Reddy.

The research on the Impact of NQF and this summary report is also a proud legacy for the 5th SAQA Board that was responsible for overseeing the implementation NQF Act and the establishment of the necessary structures and moved the NQF from the phase of policy development to that of policy implementation.

I know that I can speak for members of the NQF family, when I say that we feel privileged to have shared in so much positive, intense, ethical and collaborative work for the future of our country.



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## 1. Introduction and background

The primary purpose of this summary report is to extract and share, in an accessible form, the key findings and recommendations of the 2014 NQF Impact Study. The comprehensive study report describes the entire history of the NQF since its inception, while this report will focus primarily on the actions taken to build the NQF since the NQF Act of 2008.

As part of an ongoing effort to understand and contribute to the long-term advancement and development of the NQF, the 2014 study reflects the insights of many years of intimate involvement with NQF issues and terminology. Since the NQF is likely to be the subject of much debate, the study should be seen as a work in progress.

The NQF Act of 2008 13.1(k) requires that the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA):

1. conduct or commission investigations on issues of importance to the development and implementation of the NQF, including periodic studies of the impact of the NQF on South African education, training and employment; and
2. publish the findings of the investigations referred to in sub-paragraph (i).

The Act also requires that SAQA, together with the Quality Councils (QCs) work collectively to achieve the objectives of the NQF. While each of the three Sub-Frameworks that comprise the NQF must be internally coherent, they are also expected to integrate into the entire articulated education, training and development system.

To assess the impact of the NQF, the 2014 study focused on the following sub-questions:

1. What is the impact of the NQF on the integration of the education and training system?
2. What progress has been achieved to date in enhancing redress, and access to, and success in learning?
3. What initiatives are underway to enhance inclusivity?
4. How has systemic transparency been enhanced and what are the challenges in this regard?
5. What is being done to enhance quality in the system and how effective has it been?
6. Has learner progression through the system improved over time?
7. What have been the gains in the last 20 years in fulfilling NQF objectives?
8. Where are the current challenges and areas for improvement?

SAQA produced a comprehensive impact study report in 2014. The impact study makes full reference to the literature on NQFs globally. The South African NQF incorporates all of the parts of the education and training system in the country. Every education and training structure and role-player potentially affects others which are below, above and alongside it. Learner progression is dependent on the relationships, including the quality of each and every part of the system. The study also showed that the NQF is seminal as a relational device to enact profound changes in the orientation of the education, training and learning landscape. While it may take different forms over time, what it consistently aims to achieve, is effective relationships to relate the different parts of the system to each other.

The study uses an innovative approach to the idea of investigating impact. The approach was developed after a review of a range of impact studies or progress reviews of the NQFs of other countries. It also builds on the experience of the two previous impact studies conducted by SAQA in 2003 and 2005.

The approach adopted for the 2014 study sought to bring together various sources of information and data. The history of the South African NQF is unpacked and the social, cultural and economic contexts of the NQF are outlined. Many facets of the NQF are described and the understanding of the NQF is deepened by exploring a number of metaphors. The fulfillment of the objectives of the NQF is surveyed in several research exercises, notably:

- a review of the design and implementation of key NQF functions;
- compilation and analysis of statistics regarding access to achievement in South Africa's education and training system; and
- in-depth reviews of the work of the three QCs (Umalusi; Council on Higher Education- CHE; Quality Council for Trades and Occupations - QCTO).

The comprehensive 500-page report is packed with detailed accounts, figures, tables and academic analysis and is available on the SAQA website at [www.saqa.org.za](http://www.saqa.org.za). There is also a 100-page report comprising data highlights and summary analyses, on the website.

## **2. Structure of the comprehensive report**

Chapters 1 and 2 sketch the background and context of the study, and detail the methodology followed and analytical tools used. Chapter 1 explains what the South African NQF is, and why the country has an NQF. It provides tools towards building common understanding and acknowledging the differentiated motives of the various NQF partners. Chapter 2 sketches the national policy and socio-economic contexts in which the NQF is being implemented.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 present the readily-available data and first-level analyses on which the deeper analysis presented in Chapter 7 is based. Chapter 3 which addresses research questions 2, 3 and 6 presents data and analyses relating to the NQF objectives of redress, access and success in the different education and training sectors, and to initiatives to get people into the system. Chapter 4 addresses research question 1. It presents an analysis of data that reflect the extent of systemic integration linked to the NQF. Chapter 5 addresses research question 4, by analysing the NQF's transparency initiatives, and the extent to which systemic transparency has been achieved.

Chapter 6 addresses research question 5. In this chapter, each of the three QCs presents an analysis of its approach to quality assurance and describes how these approaches have been developed over time, and some of the effects and implications of the approaches adopted.

Chapter 7 addresses research questions 7 and 8. It draws on threads from the whole report, and especially on the data and first-level analyses in Chapters 3, 4, and 5. The tools

described in Chapter 1 are used to show that while the identified challenges remain, South Africa is slowly but increasingly moving in the desired directions. The role of the NQF in promoting this movement is explored.

Chapter 8, the concluding chapter, again draws on the whole report to provide recommendations for the way forward.

### **3. Understanding the NQF**

#### **3.1 A broad view of the South African NQF**

The NQF Act of 2008 was designed to build on the experience and structures established since the SAQA Act of 1995. The NQF Act was widely welcomed, as it began to effectively address the tensions between labour and education that had vexed the country since before the transition to democracy and that had negatively influenced the implementation of the NQF at times.

The 2008 legislation restructured the NQF in order to overcome contradictions and problems that had emerged in the first decade of implementation. Contentious issues included the centralised approach to standards setting, which was seen as over-riding differences in forms of learning; disputed systems for curriculum design and quality assurance and unresolved tensions between education and training structures regarding the working of the NQF.

Some changes to the 2008 legislated changes to the NQF had unintended consequences and made heavy demands on the system. For example, the change of the NQF from eight to ten levels of qualification types across three integrated Sub-Frameworks (at this time only the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework [HEQSF] existed in the form of the HEQF), created ongoing transitional complexities in its implementation. The situation was further compounded by the fact that while Umalusi and the CHE were well established, the QCTO needed to be created in response to a complex trades and occupations environment.

The role of SAQA as the “apex organisation” among the NQF agencies shifted and needed clarification in practice. SAQA’s large qualifications development and quality assurance functions were devolved to the QCs, SAQA was mandated to play a greater co-ordinating role. Although the NQF Act is clear about SAQA’s powers and responsibilities, the way that these provisions are interpreted by different stakeholders still creates occasional contention. In spite of these challenges, the changes were met with a positive, even optimistic, spirit. The result was the start of a period of fruitful action, engagement and collaboration that is detailed in the 2014 impact study.

The NQF Act initiated an integrated framework capable of recognising and relating distinct forms of learning in South Africa. At the same time, it differentiates between three broad sectors of learning served by three QCs:

- General and Further Education and Training - GFET (managed by Umalusi);
- Higher Education (managed by the CHE); and
- Trades and Occupations (managed by the QCTO).

These QCs each work within their Sub-Framework contexts, and these Sub-Frameworks are co-ordinated by SAQA, which is responsible for various functions, and especially for fostering communication and articulation (linkages and mobility) within the system. The Minister of Higher Education and Training (MHET) carries overall responsibility for the NQF.

### **3.2 Renewal and innovation in policy and practices since 2009**

This highly summarised section looks at major developments within the NQF that have been undertaken by SAQA and the QCs between 2009 and 2014. It should be clear that each development impacts on the other and is impacted by them in turn. In each development, the mission of the NQF has to be shaped in relation to the complex realities of implementation in very different contexts, and in relation to the network of statutory and regulatory provisions which applies to each issue.

One of the key steps taken in response to the NQF Act of 2008, was to design the agreed-to NQF Implementation Framework to guide future development. This was one of the early signs of a far greater and more amicable collaboration within the NQF than had been the case under the SAQA Act. The agreement on a System of Collaboration which still continues to take effect in the work of the CEO Committee that includes representation by invitation from the NQF Inter-Departmental Steering Committee (DHET and Department of Basic Education and Training- DBE). This collaboration has been established initially is further strengthened by the fact that the CEOs of SAQA and the QCs are all ex-officio members of each other's Board/Councils. The quest for integration with differentiation has most recently been expressed in positive participation in a process to promote relational agency within the NQF.

The idea of level descriptors was already mooted in the 1990s and was established as an eight level framework under the SAQA Act. The first level descriptors from levels 1-4 was promulgated prior to the 2008 legislative changes. It was viewed as an essential tool in meeting NQF objectives. But there was much contention about its nature and feasibility. Level descriptors detail increasing cognitive capacity and competence over the 10 levels of the NQF. It is difficult to do this across all disciplines and forms of knowledge in a way that is not so generalised that it is without significance. At the same time, without level descriptors the allocation of equivalent status to different qualifications can be tendentious and unjust. The publication of widely negotiated and agreed level descriptors for the ten levels of the NQF in 2012 was therefore an important achievement.

While the NQF was seen as comprehensive and as recognising many kinds of worthwhile learning, professional competence had seemed difficult to place on the NQF. In spite of their importance on the learning landscape, professional bodies (which govern access to formal status in many professions, trades and occupations) were difficult to place on the NQF. After 2008, research and development led to agreements on the incorporation of professional bodies on the NQF. In this move, the difference between qualifications and professional designations was defined. Although designations, unlike qualifications, have to be earned

and regularly re-instated by continuing participation and professional development, they are now registered by SAQA on the NQF.

Since 2008, there has been a special focus on articulation and integration in the NQF. Specific national workshops have focused on the conceptual and practical challenges of articulation across the sectors of the NQF. Articulation has been a special concern in the process of developing the three statutory Sub-Frameworks of the NQF for determination by the Minister in recent years. The pressure for greater simplicity and coherence continues in ongoing work on the further development and advancement of these Sub-Frameworks. Articulation has also been a special concern in ensuring that the NQF plays a constructive part in the roll-out of new national policy on post-school education and training (PSET) - an arena of core concern within the NQF. This work has led to increasing awareness of the need to clarify learning pathways within and across the Sub-Frameworks of the NQF.

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) was a key aspiration of the NQF from its earliest conception, but had not been fully implemented. . The idea had initially seemed obvious, simple and clear. The realities of implementation in different contexts and for different purposes raised difficult, sometimes intractable, issues. These were not resolved in spite of the set of criteria and guidelines published by SAQA in 2002 and 2003. From 2008, pressure to fulfill these aspirations led to a series of workshops culminating in a major conference on RPL in 2011. This drew on emerging international and local experience, expertise and research. It informed a subsequent joint process which led to the publication of a considerably clarified policy and guidelines in 2014 as well as other resources for understanding and implementing RPL. The related idea of Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT) was mooted in the NQF Act of 2008. National policies for CAT and Assessment have recently been published.

An ambitious undertaking within the NQF has been creating the link between the NQF and Career Advice. For a number of years in the period under review, an awareness campaign was run. This involved the use of marketing techniques in many regional events - especially focused on the youth - and weekly radio broadcasts on all the African language programmes of the SABC. The advocacy campaign was tied to the creation of a multi-channel career advisory service using telephone, website, fax, email, sms, and social media (Facebook, Twitter etc.) This facility was established at SAQA, before being moved to the DHET to enable it to be operated on a larger scale.

In serving and tracking all of these developments, the National Learners' Records Database (NLRD) has increasingly come into its own. The impact study shows that it has grown in comprehensiveness in its recording of registered qualifications and learner achievements. It is accessed by more and more education providers and employers for the verification of qualifications; as such, it is a powerful tool for articulation. It is now also able to throw light on trends and needs in education and skills development and is available to guide policy within and beyond the NQF.

In the 2014 impact study, building quality is the theme of the major chapter on the work of the QCs (detailed in Chapter 6 of the comprehensive report). Here we can see the scope and depth of Umalusi's research and practices for building quality in key school-leaving examinations. The commitment is further expressed in the recent development of new



qualifications for adults, and in clarifying relationships within the complex legacy of vocational qualifications. Higher education is also involved in research into the fundamentals of quality and is especially engaged in broad annual reviews and less frequent reviews in particular disciplines.

The QCTO in its five years of existence has set up an organisational structure as its major achievement. It has developed a sober and persuasive basis for its management of quality. In doing this, it has faced the tough tasks of managing a system that needs to acknowledge the specificity of learning required by unique trades and occupations while still trying to achieve coherence, simplicity and articulation. Some research has been undertaken into the international comparability of South African qualifications. In terms of their content and formal design properties, they generally compare well.

A major source of insight for the impact study needs special mention. Substantial space is given to figures for the performance of all the main sectors of education and training provision in South Africa. These relate in part to sectors or projects that have a close connection with the NQF. Perhaps the most notable of these is the Kha Ri Gude Literacy Campaign, where the programmes and materials were designed to lead to NQF standards, and where SAQA itself has conducted quality assurance before registering the results of successful candidates from the roughly 600,000 learners who have participated each year. This interaction has played a role in the credibility and continuity of the project.

However, other sectors - such as Grade R in basic schooling - may be seen by some to relate less immediately and indirectly to the NQF. The position that was taken was that even this level, inter alia, is highly relevant to the impact study. The NQF has affected Grade R in various ways: before the NQF there were no formal practitioner qualifications. However, because of the NQF learning pathways have been constructed, qualifications registered and providers accredited. These provisions have been linked to the standards of provision and help to determine developmental decisions, including subsidies.

In the broadest terms, as the NQF Act indicates, the NQF is comprehensively concerned with access, redress, progression, quality and transparency in all learning in the country. In addition, what happens in Grade R and even earlier is foundational to the country's future success as a learning nation. For these reasons the figures for Grade R are in some ways the responsibility of the NQF, even when it cannot claim agency in increasing access or the expression of the other objectives of the NQF at this level. From this viewpoint, the figures for the outputs and throughputs of the entire education and training system need to be foundation stones for all NQF impact studies.

Another feature of the impact study is the overview of the context of the NQF. This provides a picture of the possibilities and limits regarding the achievement of NQF objectives. For example, the fact that over 90% of the country's learners must study largely in English (as language of instruction) while English is not their home language, limits success and distorts the demographics of achievement. Insights like this must frame the understandings emerging from the impact study.

The impact study is drawn together around two key themes (indicators): moves towards systemic integration and beneficiary gain.

## **4. The complexities of studying the impact of the NQF**

### **4.1 Why is the NQF at this time a difficult object for a “normal” impact study?**

The NQF is probably the most studied enactment of post-democratic legislation. As we have seen, it has taken time to consolidate the new forms and roles required by the NQF Act of 2008. The NQF remains dynamic and developmental. The last of the Sub-Frameworks for the three QCs has only recently been promulgated.

Social impact studies (as opposed to reviews or evaluations) tend to be long-term investigations of changes over time. In the case of the NQF, much institutional development has been undertaken and many provisions have been enacted, and many role-players have been involved. While some developments can be directly linked to the implementation of the NQF, others are less directly related, with other intervening factors. This observation is supported by an externally commissioned investigation of the feasibility of an NQF impact study in 2010. The conclusion was that it would only be possible to find reliable evidence of impact some 10 years after 2008. This reality has played a role in shaping the design of the 2014 impact study.

### **4.2 Why the NQF is not an ideal subject for impact studies in general**

A review of social and educational impact studies shows that they are most often concerned with a highly specific change. These types of studies are most persuasive when they deal with matters like a particular change to the curriculum, increase in the education budget, provision of text-books or the introduction of a feeding scheme. The best indicators are concrete, carefully-selected, real-world effects of intentions. Even then, in the most focused of interventions, the attempt to isolate cause and effect is always imperfect.

Although the objectives and structures of the NQF are highly specified in the 2008 Act, the NQF is neither a single focused intervention, nor a specific policy instrument. Although it is enacted through multiple organisations, it is not an organisation. In contrast with simple interventions, the South African NQF is complex, comprehensive in its reach, and dynamically changing over time. It has even been projected as an all-embracing set of concepts concerned with transforming inherited ways of recognising knowledge. In addition, this rich identity is given expression in contexts of provision shaped by a myriad of factors - some of them unpredictable.

From another point of view, the NQF as a whole is part of the foundation of our society's learning. To extend this metaphor, it may be simple to assess the impact of a building on its users, but it is less easy to assess the impact of the foundations of the building on its users, who are affected by them, but not conscious of them. Indeed, there is something contradictory in looking for the impact of a framework the notion of which, if looked at closely, sets up a curiously mixed metaphor. The effort would be inconceivable were it not for the fact that the South African NQF was conceived from the beginning as having an activist, transformative character.

Whatever the case, whether seen in the narrowest view of the provisions of the NQF Act, or

in terms of the broadest aspirations, the study of the impact of the NQF requires considerable reflection.

### **4.3 Designing an alternative impact study for this time**

The current context and developments to date, point to the need for a nuanced grasp of the idea of impact. A relatively conventional statistical measurement of performance over time against indicators was neither feasible at the time of the 2014 study nor did it seem entirely appropriate. Because of this, the study has taken what might be called an organic or dialectical approach to studying impact.

The impact study draws on an analysis of the “NQF policy baskets” and related documents. In addition, the QCs submitted reviews of their work and commented on one another’s contributions. The impact study was shaped in part by the review of early drafts by the leadership of all the QCs, and by later comments and inputs from the DHET.

### **4.4 A broad theoretical orientation to understanding change**

The orientation adopted for the study was chosen to provide a credible foundation for analysis that was neither positivist nor reductionist, and that avoided inappropriately simplistic assumptions about causal relations. The orientation is shaped by four linked theoretical frameworks designed to chart change and growth - or what can more crudely be termed “impact”:

The overarching model comes from Activity Theory through Engeström’s elaboration of the theory into his Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). Activity Theory was developed in response to the cognitive psychology of Vygotsky. It sought to understand and map the way that institutions and significant individuals influence one another, and change and grow through complex interactions. (To use a well-known Vygotskian concept, it illuminates how agencies move one another into “zones of proximal development”.) Engeström takes this specifically into the domain of learning, and provides a range of diagrams to provide inter-related categories for clarifying the subtle dialectic of influences within cycles of change. The emergence and addressing of contradictions in systems is a strong point in the analysis, and is particularly useful in surveying the history of the NQF and seeing the impact of innovation and growth. Engeström uses the notion of expansive learning for transformation to describe the processes of interaction and their effects. These ideas are used extensively in the meta-analysis through which the NQF impact study makes sense of the wide-ranging data which it brings together.

Three linked theories enrich the analysis: Fenwick’s theory of socio-materialism, Edwards’ theory of relational agency and Bernstein’s idea of recontextualisation. Fenwick makes a useful link between social development and the material contexts in which the development takes place. Edwards gives a new status to the important but often neglected function of relationship-building among ideas, institutions and individuals in social and educational change. Bernstein writes of the “rules” that govern the way new knowledge is adopted and adapted in fresh contexts.

Through a meta-analysis based on these theoretical lenses, the NQF can be seen as an

activity system, the ‘impact’ of which is understood in terms of gains in systemic learning. In the closing sections of the impact study the rich resources listed at the beginning of this review are drawn together and synthesised in the light of the elaborated CHAT Framework.

## **5. Methodology**

### **5.1 Methods and data analysis**

In assessing the impact of a complex construct like the South African NQF, with all of its sectors, structures, organisations and role-players – it is sometimes but not always possible to draw straight-forward lines of cause and effect. The NQF was thus viewed as an activity system. Information and data were compiled and viewed through the lens of an elaborated version of Activity Theory. Data that showed trends in relation to the NQF objectives were collected and linked to the activity system of the NQF through CHAT.

Data and information were obtained mainly from the National Learners’ Records Database (NLRD); the Education Management Information System (EMIS); the Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS); the Higher Education Quality Management Information System (HEQMIS); publications issued by the MHET, DHET, DBE, SAQA, and the QCs. Documentary analyses accompanied the analysis of the quantitative data.

Discussions were held with, and data and first-level analyses obtained from, 10 senior staff members from SAQA and the QCs, in response to the research questions. Feedback was sought on analyses conducted by the lead researcher as part of the study. The substantial analyses of developments within the three Sub-Framework contexts were provided by the three QCs in collaboration with the lead researcher.

Methods used to gather information and analyse the data for this study included the following:

- A documentary analysis of the ‘NQF policy baskets’ and related developments associated with the SAQA Act and NQF Act;
- An analysis of trends in readily-available datasets and first-level analyses relating to redress, and learner access, success, and progression, between 2000 and 2014, depending on data availability, across the NQF sub-sectors; and
- The use of CHAT and ‘expansive learning for transformation’ as the theory of change to conduct a meta-analysis of shifts in developments in the education and training field showing the impact of the NQF.

Impact studies usually involve empirical investigation against carefully constructed indicators designed to show change in relation to a particular phenomenon. In the present study, the broad indicators of ‘moves towards systemic integration’ and ‘beneficiary gain’ were selected because (1) aspects that could be evaluated over extended time, including post-hoc analysis, were needed, and (2) the QCs were at different stages of development at the start of the study, and working in different ways, preventing the use of detailed and uniform indicators.

The impact indicators of ‘systemic integration’ and ‘beneficiary gain’ were selected for their

potential to reveal the footprint of the achievement of NQF objectives on the education and training system. These indicators were seen as ‘stretch indicators’ in that they are sufficiently general to enable the evaluation of transformations and developments over time. Arguments could be made to link NQF-related developments to systemic integration and beneficiary gain. The generality of the indicators enabled the QCs to analyse their respective quality-related initiatives, including beneficiary gain, over time, while still allowing for differences in the Sub-Framework contexts, and for the different developmental stages of the QCs.

The CHAT categories and *expansive learning* spiral were found to be useful for:

- systematic analysis of the impact of the NQF over time;
- pin-pointing specific aspects where the NQF has had an impact;
- identifying relationships between particular parts of the system;
- understanding the elements of an activity essential for a successful outcome when interacting activity systems are involved;
- retrospective reflection on why a successful activity was successful; and
- for identifying the elements necessary for transformation.

## 5.2 Limitations of the study

The methodology utilised in the 2014 NQF Impact Study included some triangulation of information. Data were obtained from specialists within SAQA, the DHET and the DBE. The QC inputs were provided by specialist leaders within each of the QCs. The researchers were located within SAQA, and all of the organisations involved had opportunities to engage with the texts of the others. The limitation of this approach was that time and resources did not permit the inclusion of wider stakeholder inputs. Future NQF impact studies should ideally include in-depth focus group interviews with all the stakeholders using the processes and tools developed by SAQA, the QCs, and the two education departments. There are elements of stakeholder voices throughout the booklet and larger report on which it is based, but in-depth focus group interviews would have strengthened the triangulation of information.

## 6. Findings

This section first provides a detailed narrative summary of findings linked to the key research questions. It is followed by a high-level summary table that seeks to interpret the findings in relation to the NQF objectives. The CHAT categories of ‘subjects’, ‘objectives or outcomes’, ‘mediating tools’, ‘rules’, ‘communities of practice’ and ‘divisions of labour’ framed the analysis.

### 6.1 Integration of the education and training system

- Under the SAQA Act, the NQF impacted on the education and training system through radical structural integration within the spread of sectors making up the system. The NQF also impacted on public thinking, in which it was seen variously as (a) the Level Descriptors and ‘grid of qualifications’, (b) the activities of integrating body ‘SAQA and its partners’, and (c) the focus in education and training, on systemic integration, transparency, redress, and learner access and success. NQF implementation impacted on the views of the then-Departments of Education and Labour, narrowing the differences between them. It also impacted on academic discourse, where the ideas of learning pathways, and the blockages in these pathways, emerged.

- There was further restructuring of the main education institutions, including the establishment of the DBE, DHET, and the QCTO. The NQF impacted on understandings, and differentiated forms and contexts of learning were acknowledged and given equal weight in the form of the three Sub-Frameworks. Notable attention was focused on 'learning pathways', 'articulation' and 'articulated pathways'. Understandings of these pathways broadened and deepened: learning pathways are currently understood in at least three different ways, each of which can be supported to assist learners (details are provided in Sections 7.1.1 and 4.3.1.1 of the comprehensive study report). Collaboration between role-players in education and training has increased, as evidenced in the NQF Implementation Framework, the System of Collaboration, and the suite of NQF policies developed collaboratively. Also, Initiatives to build 'Relational Agency' commenced.
- Attention was drawn to the fact that the NQF and debates around integration are located in wider and centuries-old debates around knowledge, and the politics of knowledge. Integration has a social justice agenda. In addition, there are blurred lines between traditional dichotomies. An example is the division between 'contact' and 'distance' provision, where increasingly, there are technology and off-site participation in contact modes, and residential blocks in distance teaching and learning.

## **6.2 Redress**

- Stakeholder discussions around education and training from post 1994 recognised RPL as being central for redress.
- Under the SAQA Act, SAQA, with contributions from RPL experts, developed a National RPL Policy and Criteria and Guidelines. RPL processes were seen as being generic. A 2008 OECD study described "Islands of excellent RPL practice" in the country.
- Under the NQF Act, barriers to development of a national RPL system were identified and work commenced within SAQA and the Ministerial Task Team, to address these barriers. The differentiation of the NQF Sub-Frameworks impacted on RPL, for which differentiated purposes and methods were recognized. Revision of the national RPL policy involved collaborative work with RPL stakeholders across the board, including incorporating inputs from representatives from all sub-sectors of the 3 NQF Sub-Frameworks. Strategic national RPL initiatives were implemented.

## **6.3 Learner access, success, and progression**

- Access was initially understood in terms of physical access to institutions of learning within the country, as well as internationally. Under the SAQA Act, the focus was on enabling access for all learners regardless of population and gender group categorisation. Over time, the understandings of access shifted to emphasise learner throughput and success rates, and international mobility.
- Under the NQF Act, the understandings of access deepened to include learners' ability to progress through the sub-systems in which they were studying, and achieve success, or 'deep access' to the forms of knowledge and skills they sought to develop. Access was associated with learner support via national career advice, flexible provision, amongst

other ways. Analysis of available data from the years 2002 to 2012 showed that overall; the numbers of learners accessing the system, and progressing through it had substantially increased. There were more female than male learners, and female learners achieved at higher levels than their male counterparts. Race-based *apartheid* patterns were disappearing over time but have been replaced by class-based patterns.

- In the schooling sector, enrolments in Grade R/ Grade 1 increased steadily between 2006 and 2014. However, numbers of full-time learners registering to write the National Senior Certificate (NSC) exams decreased steadily across 2008 to 2013 while the numbers of part-time learners increased. The results show a general drop in the numbers of learners completing 12 years of schooling.
- The study showed significant growth in the proportions of students enrolled at public TVET Colleges across 2011 and 2012, and overall growth in the numbers of learners enrolling at TVET Colleges.
- In Higher Education, student enrolment and completion numbers increased steadily between 2005 and 2012, and showed more female than male students. Although student throughputs were lower than desired, there was an increasing proportion of students who graduated across these years with female students showing higher success rates throughout. Differences between the graduation rates of students in the different population groups narrowed between 2005 and 2012. The overall numbers of students graduating via distance modes increased in the 2005 to 2012 period with the percentages of African students graduating via distance modes showing a slight decrease. The mode of provision – distance, contact, public, private – in combination, clearly contributed to the overall access, redress, success, and progression rates of students.
- There was an overall increase in the achievement of occupational qualifications between 2002 and 2012, and the relative increases in the proportions of achievements by female learners, and by learners from all population groups and especially by African learners point to increased access, redress, and success. There was a general increase in the total numbers of learnerships completed and recorded on the NLRD between 2004 and 2012, with more unemployed or pre-employed than working people registered and certificated for *learnerships* in 2011 and 2012. Although fewer unemployed/ pre-employed than working people registered for and were certificated for *skills programmes* across both years, significant numbers of unemployed/ pre-employed people were involved in these programmes. Between 2011 and 2012 there were increases in the numbers of unemployed/ pre-employed people being *certificated*, for *internships* and *skills programmes*. These patterns suggest that learnerships, internships, and skills programmes are important access routes to learning and work.
- In 2011 and 2012, most adult learners enrolled at public adult learning centres, but there was clearly a role for private centres. There were increases in enrolments at AET Levels 3 and 4, and for Grades 10 and 12 while enrolment trends dipped at the other levels. An analysis of access and success trends over extended time was not possible due to insufficient data. The Kha Ri Gude Mass Literacy Campaign from 2008 to 2013 showed

a general increase in the numbers of learners completing the programme over time. The demographic profile of learners in the programme was 99% African and 71% female.

#### 6.4 Quality and transparency

- Under the SAQA Act, the NQF impacted on the education and training system by introducing a national standards-based system that included unit standards, learning outcomes, and assessment standards. However, this approach was criticised for ‘fragmenting learning into little boxes that can be ticked off even by those without insight into the discipline or skills domains in question’ and similarly, for de-linking curriculum content from its disciplinary bases and traditions. Measures were taken to counter this fragmentation, including the following:
  - using ‘learning outcomes’ rather than ‘competences’;
  - taking the whole qualification and its purpose as the starting point in each instance; and
  - requiring reference to underlying bodies of knowledge.

While the approach used was criticised for being overly bureaucratic and ‘wordy’, its merits included providing national quality criteria which are at the core of worthwhile qualifications, and which could scaffold development, thereby protecting the public from fraudulent practices, and promoting transparency. Both Umalusi and the CHE developed transparent national quality assurance systems for their sectors at this time.

- Under the NQF Act, the inadequacy of a centralised system led to the current devolved and decentralised national quality assurance model. While standard-setting and quality assurance principles are consistent across the three QCs, the differentiated approach of each is recognised. Each QC is responsible for aligning its qualifications and part-qualifications with relevant qualifications on the other Sub-Frameworks, and has begun to do so. These processes, together with SAQA’s policy and criteria for the registration of qualifications and part-qualifications on the NQF, which includes a process for assessing international comparability, ensure the benchmarking of the qualifications for quality, and the inclusion of RPL, CAT, and articulation possibilities. This system shows the impact of the NQF in aligning quality with values expressed in the South African Constitution.
- The transparency features of the NQF, its Level Descriptors and NLRD have been strengthened by greater collaboration between SAQA and the QCs than was the case under the SAQA Act. This approach is evidenced by the NQF bodies jointly reporting against the NQF Implementation Framework and System of Collaboration. The following developments have also served to enhance transparency in the system:
  - The development by SAQA, after consultation with the QCs, of policies for (a) Level Descriptors, (b) System of collaboration; (c) Implementation framework (d) the registration of qualifications and part-qualifications on the NQF, (e) recognition of professional bodies and registration of professional designations, (f) assessment, (g) RPL and (h) CAT;
  - the establishment of a foreign qualification evaluation and national qualifications verification services and agreements, and accords between South Africa and other



- countries, for the recognition of qualifications across countries, and
- the establishment of national career advice services and a multi-channel NQF and advisory services helpline.

Despite the impact of the NQF on the system in these ways, there are still variations in the quality of education and training provision, learning achievements, and the extent to which information is available to different NQF beneficiaries. These differences constitute contradictions with potential for expanded learning and change. Looking at the shifts in the understandings of NQF objectives over time – redress, learner access, success and progression, and systemic integration, quality and transparency, shows deepening awareness of these elements, and changes in the organisational structures and processes that effect these elements, to match. Along with this growth in understanding came awareness of the complexity of the objectives, and differentiated ways of achieving them, based on experiences in different contexts, and research.

### **6.5 Education and training communities of practice**

- The post-1990 stakeholder negotiation led to the push for an ‘integrated system’ of education and training with equivalence between learning pathways, by organized labour, and for a ‘single system’ which excluded the ‘integrated system’ elements of institutional reform, a corporatist state, and the integration of education and training, in the Human Resource Development sector.
- Under the SAQA Act, it is a well-known fact that turf wars raged around standards, and quality assurance, between role-players. To address this NQF Act provided for a system of collaboration that guides mutual relations between SAQA and the three QCs, the NQF Implementation Framework, the main NQF organisations are working together.
- Initial understandings of articulation among various role-players have deepened since the promulgation of the NQF Act. It is now better understood that the establishment of learning pathways takes different forms, all of which can be supported by an interventionist state. The promulgation of the NQF Act has led to a revision of the related Acts governing the main NQF partners to enable systemic integration and processes making it possible for NQF entities to enter into dialogue and joint work with each other. The impact of the NQF itself is such that the education and training system is currently populated with institutions that are able to accomplish systemic integration, transparency quality, and learner access, success and progression, and have shown steady progress in doing so. These institutions are well-positioned to address the systemic challenges that remain.

The NQF includes an expanded range of communities of practice. The three NQF Sub-Frameworks cater for most education and training sectors. The White Paper for Post-School Education and Training speaks to both the public and private sectors. There are roles for both employers and for organized labour. Similarly, Professional Bodies and professional designations are part of the NQF and its Communities of practice.

### **6.6 Education and training tools and rules**

The NQF impacts on the education and training system through 'artefacts' (tools) such as the following:

- national NQF legislation, and related policies developed by the main NQF entities;
- national NQF structures and sub-structures;
- the internal organisation of NQF structures and sub-structures; and
- the other key elements of curriculum, NQF events, and relational agency.

## 6.7 National legislation

- The impact of splitting the locations of standard-setting and quality assurance under the SAQA Act, together with the centralisation of standard-setting led to a deepening of the divisions between the education and training sectors. The skills-development sector worked readily with SAQA, transforming many of its qualifications into the required unit standards-based formats. The CHE and Umalusi perceived SAQA as controlling standard-setting in ways that contradicted the historical traditions in their sectors, and reluctantly participated in the process.
- The NQF Act together with other related legislation enables SAQA and the three QCs to assume differing responsibilities as well as to work collaboratively. The suite of NQF policies was collaboratively developed.

## 6.8 Curriculum

- The curriculum is an element of the education and training system, on which implementation of the South African NQF has also had a radical impact. The transformation of the school curriculum – from differing curricula for different population groups and provinces in the country under *apartheid*, to the post-1994 single national curriculum based on learning outcomes and assessment standards, is an example of this impact. The NQF, together with other policy instruments, progressively saw the Higher Education curricula shift towards learner-centredness in the form of learner support, as awareness of trends in learner success and progression rates grew, and the need for learner support was realised. Regarding learning content in the trades and occupational sector, the proliferation of unit standards-based qualifications has been noted. Perceptions of insufficient theory led to the phasing out of the National Technical (N) qualifications only to be re-introduced due to demand. The National Certificate: Vocational- NC(V), with its curricula and elements of both general and vocational education, was implemented in an attempt to increase useful learning pathway options in the vocational sector.
- The form and content of curricula were used as tools to achieve redress and learner access, success and progression: the NQF impacted on the education and training system at the micro-level of the classroom, through curricula. Curriculum advances under the SAQA Act reflected progress regarding integration, in that national curricula were developed within the NQF Sub-Framework contexts of GFET and Trades and Occupations. National criteria were designed to inform the development of curricula of HE programmes. National quality assurance systems included the quality assurance of curriculum. Transparency was sought via curriculum elaboration in the GFET sector; specified programme approval processes in HE, and the use of unit standards in the

occupational sector – with differing levels of success.

- Under the NQF Act in some sectors the pace of transformation slowed as the curricula reached the forms desired. For example, it was argued that the extent of change in successive waves of curriculum reform in Basic Education has decreased over time. The current Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) have swung back to a teacher-centred syllabus-type curriculum, while retaining learning outcomes and clear assessment specifications. HE curricula under the NQF Act continue to need ‘scaffolding’ in the form of additional learner support. It is expected that the recently published national policy for CAT will lead to greater curriculum alignment across HEI, and ease progression for learners over time. Importantly, while the unit standards-based qualifications developed in the trades and occupational sector under the SAQA Act remain registered on the NQF, the new occupational qualifications developed and registered under the NQF Act by the QCTO are curriculum-based. There is increased potential for these qualifications, which are made up of knowledge standards, practical standards, and workplace experience standards, comprising the curriculum, to articulate with qualifications in the GFETQSF and the HEQSF.
- Awareness of the importance of curriculum for implementation of the NQF evidenced under the SAQA Act continued under the NQF Act. A number of post-2009 curriculum-related initiatives represent steps towards understanding and implementing credit transfer and other articulation possibilities. Strengthening the curricula of qualifications in each of the Sub-Framework contexts was one such area of work. Research towards understanding the nature, overlaps and differences between the curricula of selected qualifications was another. Action-research involving curriculum alignment between selected TVET qualifications and related qualifications at selected universities and Universities of Technology, for the purposes of learner progression comprised a third initiative. Partnering between a University of Technology and its surrounding TVET Colleges to enable the progression of students from the Colleges to universities was a fourth. Mapping learning pathways for selected scarce skills was a fifth. Mapping qualifications matrices for the purposes of strategic national RPL initiatives was a sixth.

## **6.9 Education and training structures**

The NQF structures and sub-structures under the SAQA Act – the DoE, DoL, SAQA, ETQAs of different types, including SETA-ETQAs and Band ETQAs (CHE, Umalusi) – were streamlined into a smaller number of structures under the NQF Act. The main NQF partners – the DHET, DBE, SAQA, and the QCs – are structures that make possible joint differentiated and integrated work. While each of the structures is enabled through its separateness, to formulate and develop the conceptualisations and approaches suited to its historical trajectories and stakeholder bases, there are forums that bring the distinct practices into dialogue with each other. The NQF Forum, Inter-Departmental NQF Steering Committee, CEO Committee, Board and Council meeting, and other policy development forums are examples of structures for collaborative work to achieve common goals.

## **6.10 Collaboration**

There is growing recognition of the importance of an additional NQF implementation tool,

that of 'relational agency' to promote greater collaboration. The suite of NQF policies developed since promulgation of the NQF Act is now complete. As the country moves into an enhanced implementation phase, collaborative relationships need to be further developed and strengthened. To kick-start this deepening collaboration, in 2014 SAQA hosted workshops on relational agency and relational expertise for staff from key NQF organisations. The aims of the workshops were (a) to make front-of-mind relational work that needs to be done, and (b) to identify and explore ways in which key organisations could support each other.

Four ideas are central to relational agency work. The first idea is that relational expertise involves additional knowledge and skills over and above specialised core expertise. Second, relational expertise involves understanding and engaging with the motives of others. It allows the expertise (resources) offered by others to be surfaced and used. Third, relational expertise is useful vertically (in authority hierarchies), but it is also relevant for horizontal collaboration across practices at similar levels in authority hierarchies. Lastly, relational expertise respects history, but is focussed on the common knowledge created through shared understanding of the different motives of those collaborating, and going forward together.

NQF-related conferences, workshops and other events and initiatives are further examples of tools that have enabled dialogue and mutual understanding under the NQF Act. The foci in these events reflect deepening understanding of the nuances of the NQF objectives and implementation needs. SAQA and the QCs, and the Departments of Basic Education, and Higher Education and Training participate in each other's events.

Each of the tools noted here, and others, encompass the 'rules' for operating and cooperating effectively in the education and training system. Importantly, the NQF has impacted on this system by requiring, and opening the spaces for the development and use of the kinds of tools described. Where there were contradictions – such as in the under-specification in school curricula, the unit standards-based occupational qualifications, unknown learning pathways or gaps in learning pathways, and others– research, development, and expanded learning have taken place. These processes need to continue to address (or challenge) the contradictions that remain.

While the openness of these organisations to the ideas, and their commitment to work with them was a historical achievement, much work remains to be done to use the ideas in the implementation and further development of NQF policy.

### **6.11 Broader societal issues**

The extent to which data and analyses show progress in relation to education and training targets, or developmental focus areas in the HRDS-SA and White Paper for PSET was considered in the 2014 study. Developments were found to address fully, three of the 11 HRDS-SA targets, to provide some insights regarding a further two areas, and to be insufficient to address the remaining six. Of the five broad areas identified in the White Paper, data and analyses in the present study were found to address two fully, and provide some insights for the remaining three.

While the timing of the present study meant that it could address the impact of NQF implementation plans and initiatives in line with the NQF Act, broader social impacts were out of reach. However, the necessary NQF structures are now in place, and are in the process of being consolidated. Related SAQA and QC policies have been developed, and implementation has either commenced or is about to commence. It will be feasible for the next NQF impact study to address the impact of the footprint of the NQF directly. In order to do so, advance-planning, adequate resources, and the collaboration of the communities involved, will be needed.

The following summary table interprets and groups the findings against the NQF objectives.

Area of activity 2009-2015	Relationship of activity to NQF objectives	Impact
Determination of NQF Sub-frameworks and other collaborative action	The Sub-frameworks are essential tools for integration and articulation among the sectors of the NQF, while providing the specifications for quality relative to the sector concerned	Together with guidelines and policy for implementation and collaboration, the Sub-frameworks generally enabled integration and differentiation
Work for quality	Research and implementation by the QCs and SAQA, including international comparisons, have both deepened and stretched the idea of what constitutes quality in a changing society and economy. Quality cannot be considered without reference to all the other objectives of the NQF	NQF provisions for quality impacted directly and comprehensively on curriculum and assessment design. Being interactive, these provisions provoked higher levels of engagement and contestation regarding the nature of quality in learning.
Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT)	RPL and CAT relate to all key concerns of the NQF: RPL and CAT are especially linked to redress for those who have knowledge and skills that are not formally recognised. They provide routes to access, mobility and progression (but can also contribute to personal fulfilment). They help to demystify qualifications and promote transparency, while clarifying learning pathways	Public awareness of RPL and CAT, and the elevation of related practices were raised through conferences and workshops. Considerable clarification of policy and guidelines was achieved. Increased recording of learner achievements obtained through RPL, was achieved in the NLRD
Level Descriptors	The NQF Level Descriptors speak to the fundamental concerns of the NQF. They describe and set the levels from 1 to 10. They thus promote quality by pointing to what constitutes sufficient depth at different levels, and oblige curriculum developers to give attention to appropriate cognitive features and forms of competence. At the same time, they constitute a cornerstone for articulation and for working towards systemic integration	The NQF Level Descriptors were developed, agreed and have been widely distributed. They have been used by the Quality Councils when developing qualifications to be registered on the NQF, and were taken into consideration by all entities developing learning programmes for officially recognised qualifications

Area of activity 2009-2015	Relationship of activity to NQF objectives	Impact
Incorporation of Professional Bodies and Designations	The recognition of Professional Bodies has contributed to the comprehensiveness of the NQF. It lifts a vital area of learning and competence into the NQF, thus promoting integration, articulation with the workplace, transparency and allowing for the development of quality. It has ensured that RPL must be consciously put in place by Professional Bodies. It requires career development and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) to be thought about explicitly. When it comes to redress it has placed emphasis on how this will be achieved	Still in its early stages, this activity has already made a contribution to the standing and articulation of occupational learning, especially where this relates to less established Professional Bodies
Career advice and NQF Advocacy campaign	Career advice is a powerful and long-desired instrument for access, mobility, career pathing. NQF linkages contribute to transparency and systemic integration	The extent of usage of the system has shown the extent of the need. It provides extremely valuable feedback relating to the adequacy and intelligibility of provision on the ground

## 7. Recommendations

The following summarises the 7 key recommendations:

1. Develop evidence-based map of learning pathways, including fleshing out the nature and contextual enablers of specific pathways within and across the three NQF Sub-Frameworks to further enhance understandings of, and progress in, articulation and integration.
2. Select areas for 'assessment of progress' on one hand, and 'developmental initiatives as well as the assessment of progress' on the other, for reporting on redress, and learner access, success and progression, as key indicators of assessing impact in future studies.
3. The main NQF partners need to consider ways in which the Quality Councils can be supported in their quality assurance work.
4. The challenges and uses of the NQF Level Descriptors as learning outcomes need to be understood better as a tool for transparency. Investigate effective ways of expanding good practice in implementation.
5. Simplify the NQF by effectively managing the proliferation of qualifications and part-qualifications and further strengthening the suite of NQF policies and their implementation.
6. Establish a working group made up of representatives from each of the main NQF partners to develop integrated differentiated indicators for the next NQF impact study.

## 8. Closing remarks

The 2014 NQF Impact Study looks at the history of the NQF from its start and shows how the NQF and the whole system of education and training provision in South Africa have grown and improved compared with the divided and divisive systems of *apartheid* South Africa. As can be seen, even in this brief review, there have been major advances in putting very important values in place: integration and articulation, quality, transparency, redress, access, progression and mobility are all given prominence in official requirements and form the basis for curriculum and assessment in all formally-recognised fields of learning. The extent of growth and improvement through experience - what the impact study refers to as expansive learning - is impressive. Especially in the past six years the power of dealing with contradictions and differences openly, has been manifest.

Features of the learning landscape, especially at the level of policies and institutional design, are almost certainly better - more just, transparent, rational and potentially responsive to national and individual needs - because of the NQF. The NQF has put in place instruments that work against the still powerful after-effects of Verwoerdian ideology. Positively, these instruments also work for responsiveness to the many global and local demands for new kinds of learning - and the recognition of traditional learning marginalised in modernity. The effects of these achievements are not easy to demonstrate in empirical proofs of causality, but the 2014 NQF Impact Study shows how the NQF reaches increasingly into local everyday provision and touches the lives of all South Africans.

When considering the impact of the NQF it is important to look at the capacity that the country devotes to making it work. In the broadest view, all South Africans (educators, trainers, learners, trainees and their communities of interest and practice) have a role in the impact of the NQF. However, the specific tasks of leading, managing and administering the NQF are the full-time work of SAQA and the QCs. In addition one must count in the time of MHET and DHET officials who give their time to the promotion of the NQF. As with nearly all official development sectors, the budgets and human resources for doing the work are small in relation to the workload and the importance of the functions involved and the system is generally under intense pressure for performance.

The NQF, as a relational device, has had significant effects in advancing and deepening the democratic principles in post-apartheid South Africa through the provision of education, training and development. It is poised to be a guide in the roll-out of the prescripts of the White Paper: PSET, and provides very important tools for the implementation of the National Development plan (NDP) and the Human Resource Development Strategy (HRDS).

The 2017 NQF impact study will be able to make use of selective and focused indicators in representative areas. Such indicators are almost as important in the thought they demand in identifying likely concrete real-world effects of the NQF as in their findings. The move from a phase of the NQF that has been mainly transitional to full implementation will allow for attention to be focused on more specific indicators of impact. However, it is important to consider the insights gained from the 2014 study on ways of understanding systems, processes, changes, developments and advancements in the NQF.