



**THE IMPACT OF THE NQF:
Summary report, 2008 to 2015**

FOREWORD BY THE CHAIR OF THE BOARD

A proud legacy

This summary report accompanies the release of the current impact study of the NQF. The Board has overseen the implementation of the new NQF structures and it presided over a period which has seen the completion of the NQF policy development phase as required by the NQF Act of 2008. The summary report offers an opportunity to celebrate the achievement of this phase. It is also intended as an appreciative interpretation and as a resource for the non-specialist reader who is unlikely to access the formidable research work itself.

The summary report highlights in 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 Research Report points us to the positive trends over the last 18 years as well to areas of improvement.

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

NJ Njeke

Chairperson: SAQA Board

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BACKGROUND

The NQF Act of 2008 13.1.(k) requires that SAQA:

- (i) 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 (ii) publish the findings of the investigations referred to in subparagraph (i)

Guided by a distinguished research committee, SAQA published a monumental impact study in March 2015.¹ 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 impact studies conducted by SAQA in 2003 and 2005.

The adopted approach demands the bringing together of various sources of information and data: the history of the South African NQF is unpacked; 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 systems; and
- In-depth reviews of the work of the three quality councils (Umalusi, Council on Higher Education, Quality Council for Trades and Occupations - QCTO).

An approach using detailed indicators to establish causal relationships was not considered appropriate at this stage. Information and data are compiled and viewed through the lens of an elaborated version of Activity Theory. (This is briefly explained in the present summary report.)

The impact study makes exceptionally full reference to the literature on the NQF. It shows that the NQF is instrumental in the enactment of critical, even revolutionary, changes in the orientation of education and training (and the relationship of education and training). 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

¹ SAQA, 2015. *Assessment of the impact of the South African National Qualifications Framework*. Pretoria
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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 impact study shows how the NQF reaches increasingly into local everyday provision and touches the lives of all South Africans.

About the present review

The full impact study is comprehensive (around 550 pages) and is packed with detailed accounts, figures, tables and academic analysis. It reflects the sophisticated insights of many years of intimate involvement with NQF issues and terminology. It is also part of an ongoing effort to understand and contribute to the long-term working of the NQF; it must be seen as permanent work-in-progress, and is likely to be the subject of much debate.

The present summary report is intended to highlight the main aspects and outcomes of the study in an accessible form. It reflects on the term of the last Board, offering a background analysis of the context in order to focus on how the NQF has played out over the last four years. (The study itself refers to the whole history of the NQF since the 1990s.) The summary report starts with a synopsis of the NQF as constituted by the NQF Act of 2008 and goes on to describe the action taken to build the NQF since the NQF Act. The summary report then discusses how the impact study went on to develop an understanding of the working of these provisions. It closes with reflection on the implications for further action and study.

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 2008 legislation restructured the NQF in order to overcome contradictions and problems that had emerged in the first decade of implementation. Contentious issues had included the centralised approach to standards setting, which was seen as overriding differences in forms of learning; disputed systems for curriculum design and quality assurance, which some saw as cumbersome and unsuitable for all sectors; and unresolved tensions between education and training - or more accurately, between the then Departments of Education and Labour - regarding the working of the NQF.

The NQF Act puts in place an integrated framework capable of recognising and linking distinct forms of learning in South Africa. At the same time, it differentiates between three broad sectors of learning served by three Quality Councils (QCs):

- basic education and training (served by Umalusi);

- higher education and training (served by the Council on Higher Education - CHE); and
- Trades and occupation (served by the QCTO).

These quality councils are each guided by their own sub-frameworks and are coordinated by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), which is responsible for various functions, and especially for fostering communication and articulation (linkages and mobility) within the system. SAQA reports to the Ministry of Higher Education and Training (MHET). Umalusi also reports to the Department of Basic Education (DBE). The Minister of Higher Education and Training is responsible for the NQF.

The following explanation of the Framework and its Objectives in the Act (Chapter 2: 4 and 5) is a key to understanding the impact study. Italics are added here to emphasise NQF features on which the current impact study focuses. The objectives are foregrounded, as they are picked up in the later discussion in this review.

“The NQF is a **comprehensive** system approved by the Minister for the classification, registration, publication and **articulation** of quality-assured national qualifications.

5. Objectives of NQF

(1) The objectives of the NQF are to -

- (a) create a single **integrated** national framework for learning achievements;
- (b) facilitate **access** to, and **mobility** and **progression** within, education, training and **career paths**;
- (c) enhance the **quality** of education and training;
- (d) accelerate the **redress** of past unfair discrimination in education, training and employment opportunities.

(2) The objectives of the NQF are designed to contribute to the full personal development of each learner and the social and economic development of the nation at large.

(3) SAQA and the QCs must seek to achieve the objectives of the NQF by-

- (a) developing, fostering and maintaining **an integrated and transparent national framework** for the recognition of learning achievements;...
- (b) ensuring that South African qualifications meet appropriate criteria, determined by the Minister as contemplated in section 8, and are **internationally comparable**;

and

- (c) ensuring that South African qualifications are of an acceptable **quality**.

The object of this Act is to provide for the further development, organisation and governance of the NQF.

3. Application of Act

(1) This Act applies to-

- (a) education programmes or learning programmes that lead to qualifications or part-qualifications offered within the Republic by-

- (i) education institutions; and
 - (ii) skills development providers; and
 - (b) professional designations, subject to the limitations prescribed in this Act.
- (2) Every qualification or part-qualification contemplated in subsection (1) must be registered on the National Qualifications Framework in accordance with this Act.”

THE QUALIFICATIONS REVOLUTIONS OF 2008-2009

2008 and 2009 were momentous years for the NQF, its structures, stakeholders and major users. The effects of the changes introduced then are still felt six years later, although there is some consensus that the transitional period introduced in 2009 is drawing to a close.

The NQF Act was promulgated in February 2008 with the implementation date set for 1 June 2009. Then the cabinet formed after the election of May 2009 introduced major changes in the governance of education and training. The former Department of Education was split into a Department of Basic Education (DBE) and Higher Education and Training (DHET). The oversight of training was removed from the Department of Labour and allocated to the new DHET. This decision was taken to allow the DBE to focus on the schooling sector and the key challenge of how to improve quality in the schooling system. The Department of Higher Education and Training was created in the interests of an articulated post-school education and training system.

This move - and the new NQF Act - were widely welcomed, as they solved the tensions between labour and education that had vexed the country since before the transition to democracy and that had almost paralyzed the implementation of the NQF at times. Nonetheless, together with the NQF Act, the shift had a major impact on structures, relationships and management systems.

Even the simplest change could make unexpectedly heavy demands on the system: for example, the change of the framework of qualifications from eight to ten levels seems straight forward. Yet even it created transitional difficulties, complicating record systems and the reporting of trends over time.

There were much heavier issues to deal with than this. The higher and general education quality councils were well established, but the QCTO needed to be created afresh in response to tough, intricate provisions designed during its earlier conception. In addition, no agreed sub-frameworks were in place to position, guide and relate the QCs.

Staffing and capacity needed to be shifted across the whole system. Staff was moved from the Department of Labour to DHET. SAQA seconded staff to QCTO to assist with setting up of the standards development function. Later the QCTO conducted interviews and appointed staff including those from SAQA who applied for those posts. The position of the 20-plus Education and Quality Assurance bodies (ETQAs) in the Sector Education and

Training Authorities was clearly specified in policy, but the transitional enactment was entangled. Technically the SETA ETQAs were abolished, yet their work needed to be continued.

The role of SAQA as the “apex organisation” among the NQF agencies needed clarification in practice. SAQA’s large qualifications development and facilitation function was devolved to the QCs, together with some of the staff involved. Although the Act was 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 massive challenges - only some have been touched on here - the change was met with a positive, even optimistic, spirit. The result was the start of a period of fruitful action and collaboration that is detailed in the impact study.

PURSUING THE OBJECTIVES OF THE NQF, 2009-2015

The NQF Act assigns the responsibility of the NQF to the Minister of Higher Education and gives him a leadership role. To this statutory role the Minister brought special personal commitment. He had played a leading role in the passing of the SAQA Act of 1995, and from the beginning had been a proponent of an integrated NQF. As a result, there was heightened political will for the NQF. The Minister set up an inter-departmental NQF steering committee consisting of the DHET and DBE which would advise him about all NQF matters. Official action has consistently recognised the importance of skills development from within a unified education and training community.

The accelerated work on the management of the sub-frameworks by the three QCs - plus pressure towards clearer commitments to articulation between them - is part of the NQF trajectory, but owes much to ministerial interest. Other key developments were equally long-term NQF aspirations and matters of concern to the MHET and DHET. These included the consolidation of policy and guidelines for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT), and the incorporation of Professional Bodies and Professional Designations in the NQF.

The MHET has recently put a special emphasis on the need for simplification - not of overarching NQF architecture, but of inconsistencies, overlaps and duplicated procedures resulting from historic layers of regulations. In other words, there is a special pressure from within on increasing the coherence and intelligibility of processes. The White Paper for Post-school Education and Training (PSET) (9.1.2) requires, specifically that no further substantial changes be made in the structures of the NQF, and that a concerted effort is made to control the proliferation of qualifications, especially those that are little used or not used at all.

Here we list the activities undertaken within the NQF in the period since the NQF Act of 2008. Later, after a discussion of the approach to the NQF impact study, we analyse the

deeper relationship of these activities to the objectives and values of the NQF, and summarise the findings relating to their impact.

The capacity of the NQF structures

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.

Ongoing “routine” work of the NQF structures

The QCs and SAQA are involved on a daily basis in activities and services which any modern government must supply, whether there is an explicit NQF or not. The way they are undertaken is guided and advanced by the provisions of the NQF Act and by occasional changes in the related regulations. These activities are each much more demanding than they may seem from their mere mention here:

Accreditation and quality assurance of providers according to general and QC-specific criteria: Quality hinges on the capacity and readiness of multiple providers to understand and enact the requirements of the NQF.

Registering qualifications: The three QCs are engaged in very different ways with the development of qualifications that meet NQF criteria, and submitting them for registration by SAQA. Thus, while Umalusi focuses in detail mainly on the quality and depth of a small number of national exit qualifications in basic and vocational education, the CHE is concerned with regulating the large number of qualifications generated by individual universities, and the QCTO must oversee the development and assessment of qualifications for multiple trades and occupations.

Moderating and verifying assessments and registering individual achievements: Each QC does this according to its own processes and submits the results for registration by SAQA, after which they are recorded on the National Learners' Records Database (NLRD).

SAQA is involved at an ever-increasing scale in evaluating foreign qualifications as a basis for recognition. The verification of authenticity is a time consuming task, particularly when it comes to qualifications of countries which do not respond to queries, and where these countries have no online databases. The sub-frameworks and the policies of the Quality Councils are taken into account in the comparison of foreign qualifications. SAQA liaises

with the Department of Home Affairs particularly in terms of verifications and the detection of qualifications fraud for visa purposes. The work on foreign qualifications has significantly enriched the NQF's international linkages and its understanding of the international comparability of qualifications.

Renewal and innovation in policy and practices since 2009

This section looks at major developments within the NQF that have been undertaken by SAQA and the QCs over the past six years. The outline here is highly summarised. It should be clear that each development impacts on the others and is impacted on 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 first steps in response to the NQF Act of 2008 was the design of an agreed NQF Implementation Framework to guide future development. This was an early sign of a far greater and more amicable collaboration within the NQF than had been the case under the SAQA Act. It was followed by agreement on a System of Collaboration which has taken effect in an NQF Forum and the CEO Forum - strengthened by the fact that the CEOs of SAQA and the QCs are all ex-officio members of all of their Boards. The quest for integration with differentiation has most recently been expressed in positive participation in a process to promote "relational agency" within the NQF. ("Relational agency" is a term that is growing in currency, and concerns being able to act in ways that promote communication and mutual understanding in the work of development. The theory emphasises the role of "relational agency" in the interaction of organisations - it is a quality that is central, not just nice-to-have. The term is used as one of the guiding concepts in the impact study.)

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 over the past two years. The pressure for greater simplicity and coherence continues in ongoing work on the further development of these 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 sectors of the NQF.

In the impact study, building quality is the theme of the major chapter on the work of the QCs. 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 on 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 organizational 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 which acknowledges the specificity of learning required by unique trades and occupations but must be coherent, relatively simple and capable of 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.

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) was a key aspiration of the NQF from its earliest conception, but had faltered. 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 fulfil 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 and research. It informed a subsequent joint process which led to the publication of considerably clarified policy in 2014 and guidelines, 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. Policy for CAT has also been published.

The idea of level descriptors was already mooted in the 1990s. 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. In terms of a joint understanding the underlying qualifications will be placed on the NQF. It is likely that when the NQF Act is reviewed, designations will be placed on a different register, not on the NQF. now have a place on the NQF. Professional bodies that have put themselves forward for recognition have just completed the first stage of a required process of monitoring.

An ambitious undertaking within the NQF has been a linked programme of NQF Advocacy 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 housed in the DHET to enable it to be operated on a larger scale.

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 will be available to guide policy within and beyond the NQF.

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF THE NQF

*Why the NQF is a difficult object of "normal" impact study **at this time***

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 - and will always be - dynamic and developmental. The last of the sub-frameworks for the three Qualifications Councils 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, but there is too little basis for empirical data collection about concrete effects. For the most part, one could do pre-, but not post-, studies. 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 ten years after 2008.

This situation has played a role in shaping the current impact study. It should also be remembered that the effects of the world economic crisis of 2008 were starting to be felt in South Africa. The prospect of severely limited budgets put a damper on developments that needed to be well-resourced - among them tracking of impact.

*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: they 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 its foundations 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*. (Looked at closely, the notion 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.

Designing an alternative impact study for this time

The reflections in the impact study point to a need for a nuanced grasp of the idea of impact in this context - one which focuses more on plotting change than doing something akin to ballistics.

A relatively conventional statistical measurement of performance over time against indicators was neither feasible at this time nor did it seem entirely appropriate. Because of this, the present impact study has taken what might be called an organic or dialectical approach to studying impact.

A broad theoretical orientation to understanding change

The orientation adopted for the study was chosen to provide a credible foundation for analysis that was not positivist or reductionist, and that avoided inappropriately simplistic assumptions about causal relations.

The orientation is shaped by three 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 overcoming 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, reaction and growth. Engeström uses the notion of *expansive learning for transformation* to describe the processes of interaction and their effects. This is used extensively in the meta-analysis through which the NQF Impact Study makes sense of the wide-ranging data which it brings together.

Two linked theories enrich the analysis: Edwards' theory of Relational Agency and Bernstein's theory of recontextualisation. Edwards gives a new status to the important but 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 whose "impact" 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.

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 from the DHET.

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 match 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 in 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 indirectly to the NQF. The research committee has taken the position 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; 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 and so on 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 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 on 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: moves towards systemic integration and beneficiary gain.

GAUGING THE IMPACT OF THE NQF

Access, progression and redress through the provision of education and training

Over time understandings of access shifted to include learner throughput and success rates. This has corrected the earlier approach of focusing on physical access.

Under the NQF Act (RSA 2008c) understandings of access developed 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 2002-2012 showed that overall, the numbers of learners accessing the system, and progressing through it increased; there were more female than male learners, and female learners achieved at higher levels than their male counterparts. *Apartheid* patterns were disappearing over time. Patterns per sector show a more varied picture, as follows.

In the schooling sector, enrolment in Grade R (pre-school) increased steadily between 2006 and 2014, and there was almost-universal enrolment in primary school. Integration in the form of the introduction of national testing at school Grade 1-9 levels occurred; learner achievement levels were low in these tests, but improved across the three years of implementation.

Numbers of full-time learners registering to write the National Senior Certificate (NSC) exams decreased steadily across 2008-2013; numbers of part-time learners increased; low percentages (about half) of learners registered to write the NSC exams relative to numbers in the corresponding age cohort in the general population. Pass rates of 64-78% in the NSC exams were achieved in 2008-2013, where taking into account those enrolling to write the NSC exams, and those actually writing, and a further 20-30% drop between those writing and passing, means 'actual' pass rates of 58-62%. Comparing these figures to the numbers of learners enrolling for Grade 1, around one eighth of the numbers enrolling for Grade 1, passed the NSC exams in the years analysed.

Regarding the National Certificate: Vocational (NCV) and N programmes, there was deep access for relatively small numbers of learners; learner success increased steadily with NQF level. Importantly, variation in the pass rates across colleges with some 100% pass rates opened the possibility of spreading good practice. 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 were noted. This has mostly to do with increased funding made available through the intervention of the Minister of Higher Education through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme - NSFAS.

In Higher Education, student numbers increased steadily between 2005 and 2012; there were more female than male students in this period, and the gaps between proportions of students from different population groups on one hand and the proportions of those population groups in the general population on the other, narrowed across this period. The student throughputs were lower than desired but increasing proportions of students graduated across these years. Female students had 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 2005-2012 period, the percentages of African students graduating via distance modes decreased slightly across these years. The gender distribution of students graduating across the 2002-2012 period was more balanced at private than in public HEI. 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. The importance of including data on artisan training in the NLRD was noted, as was the importance of tracking learner movements across learning pathways in the occupational sector, towards assessing the extent of 'deep access' in the OQSF context. There was a general increase in the total numbers of learnerships completed and recorded on the NLRD between 2004 and 2012, and more unemployed than working people registered for and were certificated for, learnerships, in both 2011 and 2012. Although fewer unemployed than working people registered for and were certificated for Skills Programmes across both years, significant numbers of unemployed people were involved in these programmes. Between 2011 and 2012 there were increases in the numbers of unemployed people registering for and being

certificated, for Internships, and certificated for Skills Programmes. These patterns suggest that learnerships, internships, and Skills Programmes are important access routes to learning.

The new Adult Education and Training (AET) Certificates – the General Education and Training Certificates for Adults (GETCA); National Senior Certificate for Adults (NASCA) and National Vocational Certificate for Adults (NAVCA) – have potential to enhance access to AET. A small amount of related data featured in national publications: in 2011-2012, most adult learners enrolled at public centres, but there was clearly a role for private centres. There were increases in enrolments at ABET Levels 3 and 4, and for Grades 10 and 12; enrolment trends dipped at the other levels. The data were not sufficient to analyse access and success trends over time.

Considering access, success, redress, and progression via the Kha Ri Gude Mass Literacy Campaign in 2008-2013 showed that numbers of learners generally increased over time. The demographic profile of learners in the programme is 71% female and 99% African. As we have seen, the NQF has played a direct role in the quality assurance of Kha Ri Gude.

The impact of NQF-specific innovations

While the above account of access to the provision of education and training in South Africa is drawn directly from the impact study, the following tabulations seek to interpret the findings of the study in a short format.

| 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. | Together with guidelines and policy for implementation and collaboration, the Sub-frameworks generally enable integration and suitable 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 impact directly and comprehensively on curriculum and assessment design. Being interactive, these provisions provoke higher levels of engagement and contestation regarding the nature of quality in learning. |

| Activity 2009-2015 | Relationship of activity to NQF objectives | Impact |
|--|---|--|
| Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT) | RPL and CAT relate to all key concerns of the NQF: They are especially concerned with 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. | Raised public awareness through conferences and workshops, elevation of successful practices. Considerable clarification of policy and guidelines. Increasing registration of learner achievements obtained through RPL on the NLRD |
| Level descriptors | The level descriptors satisfy 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 level descriptors have been widely distributed. They are used by the QCs in judging qualifications to be registered, and must be taken into consideration by any agency developing learning programmes for officially recognised qualifications. |
| 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 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. |

SOME CLOSING THOUGHTS

The 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 openly dealing with contradictions and differences has been manifest.

The NQF is ready at last to start having deep effects throughout the provision of education and training. It is poised to be a guide in the roll-out of the policy in the White Paper for Post-school Education and Training, and provides very important tools for the implementation of all eleven aspects of the Human Resource Development Strategy of the DHET.

The next NQF impact study will therefore 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 a full implementation phase will allow for attention to more specific indicators. However, it is important to maintain the insights of the present impact study into ways of understanding processes influence, change and growth in the NQF.