1. Introduction and Background

One of the responsibilities of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) is to keep the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) family and its stakeholders up-to-date with the latest trends in NQF developments in the world. This article is intended to focus on the Southern African Development Community Qualifications Framework (SADCQF), to outline what has been achieved over the last six months and look ahead to what is planned for the next eighteen months.

The SADCQF was established in 2011 by the Ministers of Education in the SADC region. The purpose of the SADCQF is to enable easier movement of learners and workers across the SADC region and internationally.

The SADCQF is a reference framework consisting of 10 Regional Qualifications Framework (RQF) Levels based on learning outcomes which will provide a regional benchmark for qualifications and quality assurance (QA) mechanisms in SADC. Member States are encouraged to align their qualifications and QA mechanisms with the SADCQF. Alignment will be enabled by mutual trust and recognition of achievement at a regional level. It is also envisaged that regional alignment would enable individuals to make comparisons of their learning and competence levels and would reduce unnecessary duplication of learning and effort when moving through SADC for study or work purposes.

To give effect to this decision by the Ministers a Technical Committee on Certification and Accreditation (TCCA) was given the task of implementing the SADCQF. The TCCA is a group of experts from the 15 SADC Member States and is supported by the SADC Secretariat.

At a 20-23 September 2016 meeting of the TCCA, the SADCQF was revived and positioned for implementation. A clear two-year milestone plan was developed, and an implementation model comprising three areas namely (1) development and alignment; (2) quality assurance and (3) verification was adopted. Six countries offered to pilot the alignment and SAQA offered to assist the SADC Secretariat with implementation for a period of six months. To ensure that accurate information is disseminated about the SADCQF a fourth implementation focus area was introduced namely communication and advocacy. In order to provide support and centrally drive implementation, the TCCA Executive Committee (EXCO) was established. The EXCO held their first meeting on 12 December 2016.

Since the September meeting considerable progress has been made in the four areas of implementation.

2. Development and alignment of National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) with the SADCQF

The main purpose of the SADCQF is to promote mobility. As such, the SADCQF plays a key role in setting the regional standard for comparing qualifications obtained in SADC. Debates were held on whether the SADCQF will be a reference framework only. It was decided that the SADCQF is a reference framework for now but might later develop into a framework that has qualifications registered onto it. An alignment plan and roadmap, as well as alignment timelines were developed to assist the six pilot countries. Currently pilot countries are conducting an alignment self-assessment to position their countries to align with the SADCQF. They will continue to develop and improve their NQFs while they align.

The future plans of the TCCA are to assist pilot countries with alignment and roll out the alignment plans to the rest of SADC. Looking ahead, there is also a plan to develop a SADC NQF country overview. An EXCO member from South Africa is overseeing this implementation area to ensure that it is centrally driven and supported.

3. Quality assurance

The SADCQF encourages SADC countries to have good quality assurance (QA) mechanisms. In this regard, the SADCQF links up with regional QA bodies. Already meetings were held with representatives of the Southern African Quality Assurance Network (SAQAN) and the Southern African Regional Universities Association (SARUA). SAQAN has nominated two QA experts to assist the TCCA with the SADCQF implementation.

The future plans are to monitor SADC countries' QA mechanisms and assist them to align with the SADC QA guidelines. Further, there are plans to create a list of credible SADC institutions and their qualifications. Looking ahead, it is important to build QA capacity in SADC. In this regard, funding and opportunities for QA capacity building is being sought, in particular opportunities to engage with the Addis Convention (Revised Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas, Degrees and Other Academic Qualifications in Higher Education in African States). An EXCO member from Botswana is overseeing this implementation area to ensure that this area is centrally driven and supported.

4. Verification

While the preceding implementation areas promote trust by ensuring that qualifications and quality assurance meets the regional standards, it is important that countries have mechanisms that can verify information about qualifications obtained in Member States. To ensure that credible, trustworthy information is being shared across SADC, a regional Qualifications Verification Network (SADCQVN) was established. The SADCQVN was initiated to strengthen verification in SADC and has applied for membership of the African Qualifications Verification Network to ensure that African qualifications can be trusted. Currently, the SADCQVN document is being translated and prepared for publication.

The future plans are to develop a SADCQVN recognition manual, develop regional policies on verification and set up verification agreements between SADC countries. There are also plans to collate statistical information on learner and worker mobility in SADC as well as on misrepresented qualifications. To ensure that the SADCQVN employs modern and innovative technologies, there are plans to pilot real-time verification in SADC. An EXCO member from Swaziland is overseeing this implementation area to ensure that this area is centrally driven and supported.

5. Communication and advocacy

The TCCA has identified platforms to advocate for- and communicate about- the SADCQF. Already information about the SADCQF has been distributed at national, regional and international levels. A communication strategy, which includes promotional material on the SADCQF, was developed and approved. Social media sites were set up and used to disseminate information about the SADCQF. Funding for a capacity-building study visit to Europe was secured for four TCCA members and the visit was undertaken on 6-9 February 2017. A report, with recommendations to the TCCA, has been developed and will be presented to the TCCA at the next meeting. The SADCQF document was edited and is currently being translated and prepared for publication.

Terms of Reference for a SADCQF implementation unit, as well as proposals for institutional arrangements for implementation, is being prepared to submit to SADC Ministers. Further, a monitoring report on the progress with the SADCQF implementation is also being finalised for the TCCA. The SADCQF has never been formally launched despite being approved in 2011. To ensure that the SADCQF is visible and that Member States commit to its implementation, a formal launch of the SADCQF is being planned.

6. Consolidation

The TCCA understands that in order to maintain the momentum created over the last six months there is a need to consolidate, review and plan the work for the next eighteen months. In order to do this the TCCA is planning its next meeting to take place in South Africa from 18-20 April 2017. The purpose of the meeting is to:

• Build capacity of the SADCQVN to ensure that it can function effectively;
• Review overall progress towards implementing the SADCQF namely development and alignment, quality assurance and verification;
• Explore the overall structure to be put in place to allow proper functioning of the SADCQF and make a recommendation to Ministers; and
• Officially launch the SADCQF.

7. Conclusion

This article has sketched the latest information and major developments related to the SADCQF implementation. It is very clear that progress has been made in aligning NQFs to the SADCQF, in ensuring that qualifications meet the regional QA guidelines and in establishing a mechanism for the verification of SADC qualifications. All of these measures are designed to build trust in SADC qualifications and enhance better movement of learners and workers across the SADC region.