

Addressing industry skills shortages in the mining sector by engaging in the new QCTO framework



In its global risk barometer for 2022, international financial services provider Allianz surveyed 2,650 risk experts in 89 countries on the biggest perils facing industries in the coming year. Notably, skills shortages were identified as the eighth biggest risk in South Africa currently. Our economic recovery and growth in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic will depend largely on our ability to address skills shortages in the labour market and the workplace. Companies and individuals should make the most of every opportunity to develop skills, and to align these skills with the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO). Responsible for the oversight of the accreditation, implementation, assessment, and certification of occupational qualifications, part-qualifications, and skills programmes, the QCTO has a major role to play in tackling skills shortages. It does so by placing vocational certification by means of learnership and apprenticeship programmes at the centre of South Africa's skills creation system.

Urgent need for practical skills and artisans

There has been an increased demand worldwide for artisans, engineers and technicians along with individuals skilled in sales and marketing. This highlights the fact that practical skills are urgently needed in the labour market and that there should be an increased focus on training artisans. South Africa's QCTO was established to manage the Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework (OQSF) by setting and developing standards, while assuring the quality of national occupational qualifications. The purpose of the OQSF is to facilitate the development and registration of quality-assured occupational and trade-related qualifications, part-qualifications and skills programmes from the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Level 1 to 8. This is intended to meet the needs of existing and emerging sectors by

ensuring that all learners, professionals, workers, unemployed and those classified as NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training), are equipped with relevant and transferable competencies to enhance lifelong employability.

Win-win for businesses and labour market

Ultimately the QCTO is intended to replace the Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA), while closing the gap whereby individuals in the labour market have the skills but lack the formal certifications or paperwork necessary to find employment or to maximise earning potential. While higher-level qualifications are essential, it is also necessary to address the immediate gap that stands between an individual coming out of school and becoming eligible to embark on the national qualification process. To this end, the QCTO has implemented skills programmes, effectively a shorter skills syllabus, at the end of which a learner can gain entry into a qualification or a part-time qualification. This also has the immediate benefit of making the individual more employable. In addition to increasing and keeping their own skills in-house, businesses can contribute to the career development of their people which provides a greater level of motivation and incentive. Skills development training also assists with reducing absenteeism where workers feel that the training they're getting is valuable to their personal growth, contributing to a more committed workforce. Where companies offer skills development opportunities, it becomes possible to redirect budget spend previously used for recruitment into training, shifting the focus to retention instead of acquisition.

The nitty gritty of the QCTO - how does it work?

As mentioned, the QCTO is responsible for the accreditation of Skills Development Providers (SDPs), authorising them to facilitate programmes and qualifications that fall under the OQSF. These include occupational qualifications including 'old' trades, N4-N6 Programmes, historically registered qualifications, and the shorter, bridging skills programmes. Any SDP offering training or intending to offer training in any of these must seek accreditation from the QCTO, and must comply with the entity's minimum criteria.

Out with SETA, in with QCTO

From June 2023, SETA accreditation will be subject to a teach-out period, after which qualifications and skills programmes will need to be aligned with QCTO. This is a valuable opportunity for training providers to align their offerings to the QCTO accreditation standards, as that is the direction in which we are headed. It will be necessary to work hand-in-hand with industry leaders in developing learning material to ensure that the necessary knowledge is combined with practical experience, hands-on learning opportunities and assessments.

Additionally, a major focus of these skills development and training programmes will be ensuring that learners are placed at companies where they can gain experience and skills in the workplace, and ultimately take up employment after assessment and qualification. The output from SDPs will be assessed

by Assessment Quality Partners (AQPs), and it is the responsibility of the AQP to sign off on the provider issuing a Statement of Result to the learner which gives them entry to the Integrated Summative Assessment for certification.

Smarter approach to skills development

For companies to maximise this opportunity, both from a tax rebate and Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) scoring perspective, they will need to ensure that they coordinate training initiatives with SDPs that are accredited by the QCTO. SDPs will need to modernise their curriculum to be more learner-focused, while forming relationships with AQPs. In order to exit learners smoothly, organisations will need to prepare their workplaces so that they are compliant with QCTO requirements, developing the necessary mentoring infrastructure to enable those placements while giving learners the best possible support. In shifting the focus from generic skills training to inclusive learner development and facilitation through the QCTO framework, it becomes much easier to address South Africa's skills shortage effectively and sustainably.

The mining perspective

With the South African and pan-African mining sectors growing significantly over the past few years, the skills shortage in this industry has widened massively across the entire spectrum of skills - including artisans, engineers and technicians. This skills shortage was further compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, with mining houses being reluctant to develop qualified people during times of economic uncertainty and limited activity. As a result, private training providers, such as SDPs, have seen a recent spike in the uptake of their services - not only for the development of skills within mining houses themselves, but also for the upskilling of local communities in which these miners operate. The need is not only to catch up on the skills that have been neglected during the pandemic, but equally to focus on skills that need to be developed for the future. Hence, there is currently a renewed emphasis on learning and development within the mining industry in South Africa, in SADC, as well as across other parts of the continent.

However, having said this, there seems to be a significant margin for improvement in the commitment of local mining houses to learning and development initiatives. While South Africa currently has more than 2 000 recognised and operational mining operations within its borders, only about 50% of them proactively submit their annual Work Skills Plans and Annual Planning Reports, as required by the Mining Qualifications Authority (MQA), to qualify for training-related tax rebates.

Repositioning legacy qualifications

Despite there being more than 2 000 operational mining houses in South Africa, there are currently only 183 SDPs. Due to the phasing out of SETAs from June 2023, these SDPs are currently working closely with the MQA and qualified curriculum designers to reposition their legacy qualifications as occupational qualifications, as well as part-qualifications, as per QCTO requirements.

In 2020/21, a number of occupational qualifications were selected to be redesigned and registered with the QCTO, and the training sector as a whole is largely in line with its targets for registering the new qualifications by June 2023. From that date, all unit-standard-based training will lapse and will no longer be registered on the mining qualification system. Instead, unit-standard qualifications will essentially be replaced or incorporated into modular training or part-qualifications.

Currently, mining training providers, or SDPs, obtain their accreditation through the MQA, but as the MQA will be replaced by an AQP in June 2023, all legacy qualifications will be placed in the QCTO basket, with this body taking charge of qualifications going forward.

Under the new structure, SDPs will still be able to obtain accreditation as different types of qualification bodies, such as those that provide training in the knowledge spectrum or compliance spectrum. For the third spectrum - workplace approval - SDPs will need to conclude a service level agreement with a mining house that runs its own training centre to obtain Workplace Approval Accreditation. Essentially, this means that SDPs will still be involved in all three spectrums of mining training.

Changes for miners

Traditionally, the training offered by private training providers to the mining industry has always been of a circular nature - encompassing a knowledge component, a practical component and a workplace component, and this will largely still be the case. The specifics of the relationship between SDPs and AQPs is yet to be determined. Hence, mining houses are not expected to see significant changes to how SDPs provide training under QCTO. There might be bigger changes on the cards for organisations operating in other sectors, where no practical training component can be provided before a trainee is deemed a competent. Nevertheless, miners will need to remain vigilant of developments in the QCTO space and specifically the emerging role of AQPs