

Can the QCTO deliver? Exploring the future of vocational training in South Africa



The Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) stands ready to revolutionise vocational education in South Africa. Established to address South Africa's skills gap, the QCTO faces significant challenges that could make its success uncertain. However, by learning from international models and adapting to local contexts, the QCTO has the potential to empower individuals and propel the nation's workforce forward.

Challenges on the path

The QCTO's path to success is undoubtedly beset with hurdles. Under-resourcing and internal conflicts within SETAs are likely to hamper its ability to function effectively. Delays in its implementation since 2010 and scepticism about its ability to deliver cast a shadow over its mission. The most delicate challenge lies in balancing inclusivity with upholding professional standards and the QCTO will need to take care to ensure its qualifications are accessible while maintaining the integrity of established professions.

Lessons from leaders around the world

Overcoming these intricate issues demand innovative solutions and a collaborative spirit for the QCTO to navigate the road ahead. There are many examples of vocational training from abroad that we can use as inspiration in South Africa. Germany has a long history of successful vocational education, characterised by high levels of collaboration in which government, employers, and unions work together to ensure training meets industry needs. There is a dual system of education, where students combine classroom

learning with workplace apprenticeships, gaining practical skills alongside theoretical knowledge. They have an established culture of apprenticeship, in which employers value apprenticeships, and wages are stable, encouraging investment in training.

The Netherlands emphasises lifelong learning, offering flexible vocational training programs that cater to various needs, usually through short courses for upskilling or reskilling workers or part-time programs for those already employed. The development of soft skills is emphasised, alongside technical skills in vocational training programs, including communication, teamwork, and problem-solving skills, all of which are highly valuable in today's workplace. Switzerland has a rigorous quality assurance system for vocational training in which independent bodies regularly monitor programs and assessments, ensuring high standards are maintained.

Adapting these models for South Africa

South Africa can benefit by adapting these features to its own context by ensuring high levels of collaboration between government, employers, and industry collaborate closely, ensuring training aligns with industry needs. It is essential that we address the educational baseline to ensure learners are prepared for the demands of formal assessments within the QCTO framework. Furthermore, the QCTO must ensure that a robust quality assurance framework is implemented to achieve consistency and credibility within the OQSF, which means that transparency in assessment processes will also be essential.

South Africa must explore ways in which to revise learnership programs to provide long-term growth for employees as well as ways to address employer concerns about poaching skilled workers. Companies are to be encouraged to invest in workplace infrastructure such as training facilities and programs that create a supportive environment for practical learning. To facilitate life-long learning, the QCTO can integrate soft skills development into the OQSF, along with its micro-credentials, to ensure graduates possess well-rounded skill sets that employers seek.

The QCTO's commitment to skills development

Despite its numerous challenges, the QCTO is steadfast in demonstrating its commitment to addressing the skills gap, by prioritising the developing relevant qualifications that directly translate to employment opportunities. This is evident in its focus on micro-credentials, which offer targeted skill development in specific areas, promoting lifelong learning in a manner that is accessible, and practical. The OQSF offers qualifications with various exit levels, allowing learners to gain valuable credentials even if they do not complete the entire programme.

Additionally, the QCTO champions a change in basic assumptions in societal perceptions. This is evident in its intention to instil a parity of esteem, aiming to make vocational qualifications as valued as university degrees by promoting skills-based careers. While there is still much work to be done in this respect, a promising start has already been made.

Prioritising efforts to tip the scale in favour of success

In the immediate future, the QCTO and employers running skills development programs can take several steps to make measurable progress on the road to success. This includes greater attention to preparing learners for the transition by bridging the gap between portfolio-based learning and the more formal assessments within the QCTO framework.

Employers and industry stakeholders must embrace the OQSF as a tool to develop relevant skills, moving away from change resistance and towards meaningful collaboration. From a policy development perspective, measures need to be taken to encourage and incentivise companies to invest in workplace infrastructure through training facilities and programs that support practical learning.

By addressing these challenges and taking inspiration from successful models abroad, the QCTO has the potential to become a game changer in skills development for South Africa. Collaboration, a focus on practical skills, and a commitment to quality will be key to its success.