

Moving forward with the QCTO framework - achieving synergy, simplification, and effectiveness



South Africa's Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) is a major driving force behind addressing South Africa's skills shortages across industries. Uniquely positioned in the Post School Education and Training (PSET) sector, the QCTO has been charged, essentially, with shaking things up and disrupting the status quo to address the inequalities of the past. As South Africa moves forward, all sectors, employers and employees must be prepared to embrace the game-changing transformations already underway. The game is changing, and so too are the rules and the outcomes. For the QCTO, the goal is to ensure that occupational qualifications and programmes are accessible and credible to all, to meet the economic demands for the skills that will take South Africa into the future.

A skills development ecosystem: pathways to employability

Looking at South Africa's unemployment crisis, the need for change is undeniable. The current system is simply not producing the skills and technical competencies required with sufficient speed or scalability. Speaking at the QCTO Game Changer Business Breakfast, QCTO CEO Vijayen Naidoo noted that it is necessary to get people out into employment as soon as possible. Given that the current qualification system is lacking, Naidoo pointed out the necessity of creating pathways to employability. This requires a change in thinking and the building of skills development ecosystems, leaving behind the old system that saw each industry operating as an island. For this, we need to understand how all industries, sectors and skills fit together and facilitate their alignment into responsive, agile, interconnected systems.

A skilled and capable workforce

The gazetting of the Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework (OQSF) in October 2021 laid the groundwork for this change, solidifying the QCTO's vision to qualify a skilled and capable workforce. 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) Levels 1 to 8, the purpose of which is to meet the needs of existing and emerging sectors. This ensures that all school leavers, learners, professionals, workers, unemployed individuals and those classified as NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training), can be equipped with relevant, sustainable and transferable competencies to establish lifelong employability.

Alignment across industries and players

The QCTO's role, Naidoo explained, is to establish and maintain occupational standards and qualifications, skills programmes, by industry for industry, with an emphasis on quality assurance of these standards and qualifications for the workplace. Here, it will be necessary for Skills Development Providers (SDPs) to align with other bodies in the PSET sector, including Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA) across industries. While the QCTO was originally intended to replace the SETAs, this is unlikely to happen. The SETAs have an important role to play, and by their proximity to industries, are here to stay. However, there will need to be more alignment between the different SETAs. Where there are currently different accreditation policies per SETA, this makes cross-industry interaction extremely difficult. Work has already begun on a single unifying accreditation policy, which the QCTO will be charged with auditing.

Out with the old, in with the new

The National Skills Development Plan (NSDP) set a target of producing 30,000 artisans per year by 2030, having identified artisans as a critical skill for economic growth and social development. Naidoo pointed out that although we are already producing around 20,000 to 21,000 artisans annually, merely ticking quantity boxes is insufficient, as the quality of those qualifications is still questionable. He explained the transition from the so-called old trades to the new and emphasised the importance of Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges and private training facilities in addressing the quality component of occupational qualifications and skills development.

Synergy, simplification, and effectiveness

Naidoo noted the importance of integrated system planning that prioritises a single national quality short OQSF that promotes synergy, simplification and effectiveness. This is necessary to guide the development and quality assurance of occupational qualifications for skills programmes that respond to South Africa's developmental imperatives, by establishing learning organisations that are themselves responsive to changing industry demands. The gazetting of the new OQSF allows vocationally trained graduates greater freedom in terms of their choice for further study, or direct access to the workplace, where they opt not to study further. This system is designed to turn the truism "qualifications are not

jobs” into “qualifications lead to jobs,” with occupational qualifications that are directly relevant to the workplace with the clear goal of helping people secure employment.

Systemic change that focuses on quality

The revised OQSF now also recognises skills programmes, which are similar to short courses or micro-credentials. In the past, skills programmes were somewhat haphazardly introduced and implemented by specific SETAs to address immediate skills needs. But with the new revision, there is a more systematic approach to incorporating these programmes, making it easier for people to gain valuable skills and improve their employability. By formally incorporating skills programmes into the OQSF, it allows for this type of micro-qualification to be systematically designed, rapidly developed and provided to learners and the labour market. This will sanction these programmes to carry recognition that allows a holder of a Skills Programme to progress toward a full Qualification should they choose. The ability of the QCTO to provide recognised, quality-assured micro-credentials to the nation is just another game changer provided by the revised OQSF.

What now for accreditation?

Responsibility for SDP accreditation lies now with the QCTO, in terms of which SDPs must apply to be accredited for the various qualifications they offer. The QCTO will complete the first phase, known as desktop evaluation, after which it will go to the SETA for verification, due to the proximity of each SETA to the industry. The QCTO’s accreditation process is designed to ensure that SDPs meet the required standards for quality training and ensure that the SDP’s curriculum, learning materials and assessment methods are aligned with the relevant occupational qualification. If the application is approved, the QCTO will issue the SDP with a certificate of accreditation, which must be renewed every five years.

A role to play for all training providers

With regards to historically registered qualifications that expired at the end of June 2023, there is a teach-out period until 2024 after which new enrollees must be in the new occupational qualifications or skills programmes. Where SDPs were offering a skills programme and they now cannot find its equivalent in the new framework, Naidoo advises SDPs to approach their SETAs and invites SDPs to join in on the development process to ensure that no skill gets left behind.

While more than 700 qualifications have already been developed with a 30% uptake, this is not enough and SDPs are urged to take a more active role in the game. Although it will be necessary for us as SDPs to re-engineer our learning models, curriculums and mindsets, embracing this is our opportunity to change the game. It is essential if we are to play a valuable role in assisting employers and individuals with access to quality education and training that meets the need for skills development in existing and emerging industries.