

QCTO's new fees under scrutiny - balancing quality and accessibility



There has been much debate in South Africa around the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) and its recently released fee structure. Although the QCTO intended to elevate the quality and credibility of occupational qualifications, there is growing concern among training providers, employers, and learners about the possible financial burden these changes may bring. The biggest worry? Whether the QCTO's revised fees will inadvertently make skills development less accessible, and hinder South Africa's progress in addressing its national skills gap.

Putting a price on quality skills development

The QCTO is tasked with ensuring training aligns with national standards and industry needs. However, the revised fee structure has raised affordability concerns. Training providers are apprehensive that increased costs might need to be passed to learners, or they will be forced to limit the scope of their programme offerings. Similarly, businesses, particularly those dependent on workforce development, fear the additional burden will impede their capacity to upskill employees, which might hinder growth in key sectors.

The QCTO's position on fees is straightforward: they believe these fee adjustments are necessary to keep training standards high. Pointing out that keeping qualifications relevant and meeting industry demands takes real investment. The QCTO asserts that a proper fee system is part of how they plan to fund that. It is now just a matter of trying to figure out how to elevate the standard of training, without making it financially impossible for everyone involved.

Airing out the real concerns

Training providers are worried about the potential impact on their ability to deliver a broad spectrum of programmes, but the QCTO argues that the new fees are meant to encourage training providers to focus on the quality of their offerings, not just the quantity. The intention is to discourage opportunistic training providers from applying for too many accreditations without having the proper resources or skills. By focusing on quality and encouraging training providers to home in on their specialisations, the QCTO aims to create a skills development model that meets world-class standards.

While it is true that businesses that need to train their workers will face higher costs, the QCTO asserts that these fees will supplement their funding for operations, ensuring efficient accreditation, accessible assessment centres, and timely EISA examinations, which will benefit businesses by ensuring a steady supply of qualified workers.

Finding the balance of quality and affordability through collaboration

Achieving a middle ground between quality and accessibility is essential. One potential solution is for the QCTO to actively demonstrate its value to stakeholders and seek supplementary funding from parliament and other relevant sources. In highlighting the real-world effectiveness of its qualifications and skills programmes, highlighting successful learner outcomes and positive industry impact, the QCTO can build a compelling case for additional financial support. This assistance would, in time, lessen the financial burden currently placed on training providers and learners, making skills development more attainable. Fostering open dialogue with training providers is essential. Some providers have suggested that including standardised training materials within accreditation fees would significantly reduce their operational costs and ensure a baseline level of quality across training delivery. While the QCTO currently prioritises flexibility in training methodologies, allowing providers to tailor their approaches, there is potential for a collaborative effort to develop optional, standardised resources. This would offer providers a choice, ensuring that while flexibility is maintained, a cost-effective option for quality material is readily available. By working together, the QCTO and training providers can find mutually beneficial solutions that uphold quality while minimising financial barriers.

The bigger picture - skills gaps and economic growth

It is a legitimate concern that the new fee structure, particularly the introduction of charges for examinations, is likely to result in the increased overall cost of qualifications. In a developing country like South Africa where upskilling is essential for progress, any potential cost escalation could be a barrier for learners that hinders efforts to address skills gaps. To find a workable way forward, it is important for all stakeholders involved, including government entities, training sectors and businesses to engage in meaningful dialogue that focuses on prioritising quality without sacrificing accessibility.

Strategies such as streamlining the connections between the SETAs and the QCTO to eliminate duplications in operational costs, as well as exploring avenues for increased state funding for QCTO

initiatives should be actively considered. However, it is important to remember throughout the process that we are seeking to establish a sustainable skills development ecosystem that supports both economic growth and workforce readiness. This must guide our collaborative efforts to overcome the challenges we face, to ensure that quality training remains accessible to all individuals.