

# **National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Bodies in a Period of Climate, Policy and Technological Tsunamis: Opportunities and Challenges?**

**Joe Samuels, 5 March 2020**

## **1. Introduction**

The world has entered a period of unprecedented technological change. Education and training institutions globally are grappling with what this will mean for them. Huge educational policy changes by multi-lateral organisations are changing the education and training landscape with many of the new policy positions requiring substantial changes at the country level to remain relevant. These changes are at play while the planet faces a massive climate crisis. I call these changes “tsunamis” because they are very big they must be dealt with very quickly. The NQF Bodies (SAQA and the Quality Councils) at home and abroad are asking how they can respond to these changes? How they can remain relevant? What are the opportunities and challenges?

I want to address an issue that many asked me about and that the statement from the SAQA Board of 31 December 2019 did not address i.e. why I resigned from SAQA and went on early retirement.

### **1.1 Why I resigned from SAQA?**

Many people have expressed shock at my early retirement and departure from SAQA. In summary I had an encounter in Parliament where the Portfolio Committee on Higher Education, Science and Technology treated SAQA and me, as the CEO of SAQA, unfairly and unjustly. The SAQA Chairperson, instead of protecting SAQA and me, apologised to the Portfolio Committee. The SAQA Board supported the Chairperson and decided, on the basis of fear of possible victimisation, not to engage with the Portfolio Committee directly and decided that they will only bring this matter to the attention of the Minister. I strongly believe that it is the duty of the Chairperson and the SAQA Board to protect the organisation and its CEO against unfair attacks in public and private. In my resignation letter I proposed a 6 months transition period, however the SAQA Board decided that I should leave within 24 hours. However, after some negotiation initiated by some SAQA Board members an “exit strategy” was agreed that included me “working from home” for the month of January 2020.

So to go back to the focus of the Dialogue.

### **1.2 An NQF For What?**

One of the fundamental questions that we need to ask on a consistent basis is, “an NQF for what?” We consistently asked this question while I was at SAQA. Last year, as part of the 21st birthday celebrations of the NQF, we dealt with this question as part of our collective reflection on the past and on the future projection of the next 21 years. I never believed that NQFs is simply an instrument of the neoliberals, as has been asserted by some critics and commentators. We have used the NQF to address the most

marginalised in the country, notably via the Khari Gude Project. I always believed that an NQF is a site of struggle.

I will focus on three matters that we deliberated when we dealt with question of “an NQF for what?” Firstly given the climate crisis we are living in, can the NQF serve the South Africa that we want? Secondly, how does the NQF serve South Africans when the unemployment rate is so high. Should we be thinking about sharing our skills base with the other 15 countries in the SADC region and in the rest of the African continent as well as the globe. If this is indeed what we can do, then we should be aware of the structures and policies that are being fashioned in the regional, continental and global fora. I term them tsunamis because whether we like them or not these changes are coming, in fact they are already here. We can call them “Joe’s pet projects” to try to diminish them, however, it must be addressed. I will begin the talk by dealing with issues of climate change first, I will then move onto the structures and policy changes in SADC, then the continent and the world. I will finish off my presentation by reflecting on the 4th industrial revolution and its implications for us.

## **2. Climate Change**

The structural and policy changes cannot be compared to the climate crisis facing humans. Government has made a number of important moves to address the climate crisis. A draft *Climate Change Adaptation Strategy* was released for public comment in May 2019. Municipalities have all developed climate change response strategies. Although elements of the climate awareness have been built into some of the curricula of schools and tertiary institutions, the lack of widespread awareness and understanding is concerning. It seems that much more needs to be done by NQF Bodies and educational institutions. One of the proposals that came out of the SAQA dialogue with the European Union Commission in June 2019 was to update the critical cross field outcomes and to elevate the one on environmental sustainability. This move may force educational institutions to take this matter much more seriously. While we are in the midst of the climate crisis it is also worrying that the number of learners taking up subjects like geography and agricultural science has consistently decreased over the past number of years. Therefore interventions are urgently required at the schooling level as well. It is very clear that NQF bodies and institutions have a massive responsibility to engage with the climate crisis and cannot do “business” as usual.

## **3. Regional and Continental Policy Changes**

Regional and continental policies have huge implications for the educational institutions in South Africa. The establishment of a Southern African Development Community Qualifications Framework (SADCQF) and the development of the proposed African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF) are two such examples. Both frameworks are seen as tools for recognition of qualifications and mobility of learners, workers and youth, and professionals across the continent. South Africa and the Seychelles aligned their National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF) with the SADCQF. The other 14 SADC member states are currently busy with their processes of alignment. Quality Councils and educational institutions in South Africa must now show this alignment to the SADCQF on

their transcripts and certificates to make learner mobility possible. The ACQF is part of a broader initiative called the “African Continental Free Trade Area” (AfCFTA) and is designed to address youth unemployment. The ACQF will be implemented over the next three years. Currently consultants are busy with a mapping exercise that will be completed in June 2020. A workshop on the ACQF is being planned for 1-3 April 2020 in Pretoria. Education stakeholders should actively participate in the thinking about this new concept to ensure that their interests are included.

South African institutions will have an added advantage in 2020 because the SA president is chairing the African Union and is driving the continental processes clearly wanting to see his term to be a success.

#### **4. Policy Changes From UNESCO**

The activation of the Addis Convention on 15 December 2019 puts in place a set of principles to facilitate the recognition of higher education qualifications across the continent. Given the ratification by South Africa’s parliament in March 2019 it is now legally binding on all institutions. The implications of the parliamentary ratification is that all draft policies should be aligned with the Addis Convention e.g. the draft Internationalisation policy and the draft white paper on higher education and training action plan.

The Addis Convention also gained more significance given the adoption of the Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education by 193 Member States on 25 November 2019. Both policy documents include concepts like recognition of qualifications, certified recognition of prior learning (RPL), partial studies, quality assurance, learning outcomes, eradication of fraud, and credible information systems.

Although the NQF has given the country a comparative advantage, educational institutions have been very slow to adopt and implement some progressive policy changes. The higher education sector, for example, took 10 years to move from the 8 level to a 10 level framework. RPL is implemented in a non-consistent and partial way. NQF bodies have been reluctant to adopt the recognition of partial studies. Those institutions who take up the challenge and align with these progressive initiatives will reap the benefit from regional and global agencies that want to support the implementation of these policies.

#### **5. Fourth Industrial Revolution**

The fourth industrial revolution (4IR) raises fundamental questions for society. Massive job losses are predicted as the narrative used is “artificial intelligence is taking your job”. Educational stakeholders are asking how they can and should respond? Global NQF experts present two scenarios for the future of NQFs; Scenario One predicts that technology will overtake and replace NQFs, while another scenario predicts that NQF bodies could integrate the new technology into their processes. The second scenario,

however, requires that NQF bodies should move very fast or face the possibility of imminent distinction.

4IR can either be used to further embed inequality, unemployment, racism and sexism or could be employed to address capacity constraints in resource deficient environments. The tools of the 4IR can be used positively to create jobs, empower workers, building capacity of workers and to change power relationships. Educational Institutions can teach learners to be critical thinkers in the era of the 4IR, and NQF Bodies can use these tools to speed up registration and accreditation implementation processes and turnaround times. Currently educational institutions wait sometimes up to two years for accreditation and registration processes to be completed. With the new technology, the turnaround times could be reduced to weeks if not days or hours. Imagine institutions can get their qualifications registered, learning programmes accredited, qualifications verified and foreign qualifications evaluated within days and hours - how this will put the education and training system ahead of the game and improve our productivity?

## **6. Conclusion**

Alignment and strategic positioning to the new policies provide opportunities for educational institutions and NQF bodies to play more active roles globally. It allows learners, young people and professionals opportunities to move across boundaries and build a future across national boundaries. Quicker turn around times will place our education and training sector ahead in the global context.

I have adapted the words of President Nelson Mandela when he thanked the world on 16 April 1990 at Wembley Stadium in England shortly after he was released from prison to say thank you to you tonight;

*“My first simple and happy task is to say thank you to Noel Daniels (CEO) and Cornerstone Institute, Gugu Ndebele and Shirley Walters for making it all happen!*

*Thank you to Marie-Louise, my children and my family that you chose to care, and share my time with my work, because you could have decided otherwise.*

*Thank you very much to all of you for coming tonight and making this event special.*

*Thank you all of you that you elected not to forget, the tiny contribution that I have made to the education and training community”.*

## **7. Documents for Further Reading**

7.1 SADC Qualifications Framework - [www.saqqa.org.za](http://www.saqqa.org.za) › docs › webcontent › Article about the SADCQF (downloaded on 1 March 2020)

7.2 Addis Convention - [http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=49282&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=49282&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html) (downloaded on 1 March 2020)

7.3 Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education  
- <https://en.unesco.org/themes/higher-education/recognition-qualifications/global-convention>  
(downloaded on 1 March 2020)

7.4 Draft National Climate Change Adaptation Strategy Government Gazette no. 42446 6  
May 2019