
GOVERNMENT NOTICE

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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The Higher Education Qualifications Framework
HIGHER EDUCATION ACT, 1997 (Act No. 101 of 1997)

I, Grace Naledi Mandisa Pandor, Minister of Education, hereby publish *The Higher Education Qualifications Framework* as set out in the Schedule as policy in terms of section 3 of the Higher Education Act, 1997 (Act No. 101 of 1997).

Separate and parallel qualifications structures for universities and technikons have hindered the articulation of programmes and transfer of students between programmes and higher education institutions. Education White Paper 3: *A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education* (1997), acknowledges the need for a single qualifications framework applicable to all higher education institutions.

The development of this policy has benefited from extensive discussion and consultation within and outside higher education following the publication by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) of *A New Academic Policy for Programmes and Qualifications in Higher Education: Discussion Document* (2002). I express my appreciation to the CHE and all others who contributed to the development of this policy.

This new qualifications framework has been designed to meet demanding challenges facing the higher education system in the 21st century. It will guide higher education institutions in the development of programmes and qualifications that provide graduates with intellectual capabilities and skills that can both enrich society and empower themselves and enhance economic and social development.



G. N. M. Pandor, MP
Minister of Education

Date: 7 September 2007

TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE NEW FRAMEWORK IN CONTEXT	5
A single qualifications framework for a diverse system.....	5
The framework and the NQF.....	6
Standards generation in higher education	7
Qualifications, volumes of learning and credits	8
Accumulation of credits towards qualifications.....	9
Work Integrated Learning.....	9
THE FRAMEWORK	10
Characteristics.....	10
Number of levels and level descriptors.....	11
Qualification types.....	11
Undergraduate.....	11
Postgraduate	11
Qualification descriptors.....	12
Naming of qualifications.....	12
Qualifications and academic transcripts.....	13
Language of qualification certificates and academic transcripts	13
Transcript supplement.....	14
Admission to higher education	14
Progression within the framework	15
IMPLEMENTATION AND TRANSITIONAL ARRANGEMENTS	16
Implementation date	16
Programmes and qualifications.....	16
New programmes and qualifications.....	16
Existing programmes and qualifications	16
Admission to higher education	17
New programmes.....	17
Existing programmes.....	17
Full compliance	17
Higher Education Management Information System.....	18
APPENDIX 1	19
HIGHER EDUCATION QUALIFICATION DESCRIPTORS	19
Higher Certificate	19
Advanced Certificate.....	20
Diploma.....	21
Advanced Diploma.....	22
Bachelor's Degree	23
Bachelor Honours Degree	25
Postgraduate Diploma	26
Master's Degree	27
Doctoral Degree.....	29

THE NEW FRAMEWORK IN CONTEXT

A single qualifications framework for a diverse system

Education White Paper 3, *A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education* (1997), proposed a single qualifications framework for a single coordinated higher education sector. It has taken time, but this document makes good on that undertaking. It replaces the following policy documents:

A Qualification Structure for Universities in South Africa – NATED Report 116 (99/02)

General Policy for Technikon Instructional Programmes – NATED Report 150 (97/01)

Formal Technikon Instructional Programmes in the RSA – NATED Report 151 (99/01)

Revised Qualifications Framework for Educators in Schooling, in *Norms and Standards for Educators* (Government Gazette No. 20844, February, 2000). In addition, the Criteria for the Recognition and Evaluation of Qualifications for Employment in Education will be amended to ensure consistency with this policy.

The policy also provides the basis for integrating all higher education qualifications into the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and its structures for standards generation and quality assurance. It improves the coherence of the higher education system and facilitates the articulation of qualifications, thereby enhancing the flexibility of the system and enabling students to move more efficiently over time from one programme to another as they pursue their academic or professional careers.

Public confidence in academic standards of higher education institutions requires public understanding of the achievements represented by higher education qualifications. The qualifications framework is thus designed to be readily understood and to ensure a consistent use of qualification titles and their designators and qualifiers.

The new qualifications framework establishes common parameters and criteria for qualifications design and facilitates the comparability of qualifications across the system. Within such common parameters programme diversity and innovation are encouraged. Higher education institutions will have ample scope to design educational offerings to realise their different visions, missions and plans and to meet the varying needs of the clients and communities they serve.

The policy thus operates within the context of a single but diverse and differentiated higher education system. It applies to all higher education programmes and qualifications offered in South Africa by public and private institutions.

The framework and the NQF

The higher education qualifications framework is an integral part of the NQF. The terms used in this policy are therefore consistent with NQF practice.

A *qualification* is the formal recognition and certification of learning achievement awarded by an accredited institution. The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) stipulates that the learning outcomes of all South African qualifications should include critical cross-field or generic skills to promote lifelong learning as well as discipline, domain-specific or specialised knowledge, skills and reflexivity. The format for qualification specification, where appropriate, should include the title and purpose of the qualification, its NQF level, credits, rules of combination for its learning components, exit-level outcomes and associated assessment criteria, entry requirements, forms of integrated assessment, and arrangements for the recognition of prior learning and for moderation of assessment. The recognition of prior learning should enable potential students, including those who had suffered disadvantage in the past to be admitted to particular higher education programmes depending on their assessed knowledge and skills.

A *programme* is a purposeful and structured set of learning experiences that leads to a qualification. Programmes may be discipline based, professional, career-focused, trans-, inter- or multi-disciplinary in nature. A programme has recognised entry and exit points. All higher education programmes and qualifications must have a core component and may have a fundamental and or elective component depending on the purpose of the programme or the qualification. The credit allocation for core, fundamental and elective learning will depend on the purpose of the programme or qualification. The internal organisation of programmes is otherwise not prescribed by this document.

The Ministry of Education has overall responsibility for norms and standards for higher education, including the qualifications structure for the higher education system.

This policy determines the qualifications structure for higher education, which is the Ministry's prerogative. The Ministry recognises that professional bodies have a distinct role, derived from legislation or undertaken in terms of international professional conventions and agreements, to set requirements for professional registration, membership or licensing, and to regulate professional conduct. Professional bodies determine whether a particular qualification offered by a particular higher education institution meets the requirements for registration, membership or licensing. This policy does not deal with such matters, which fall outside the responsibility of the Ministry of Education.

Similarly, this policy recognises the responsibility of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) for registering standards and qualifications in terms of the SAQA Act, 1995 (Act No. 58 of 1995) and the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) of the Council on Higher Education's responsibility for quality assurance in higher education in terms of the Higher Education Act, 1997.

The Council on Higher Education (CHE) is also assigned the responsibility for the generation and setting of standards for all higher education qualifications and for ensuring that such qualifications meet SAQA's criteria for registration on the NQF in terms of section 1 (f) (ii) of the Higher Education Act.

Standards registered for higher education qualifications must have legitimacy, credibility and a common, well-understood meaning, and they must provide benchmarks to guide the development, implementation and quality assurance of programmes leading to qualifications. The CHE will put in place appropriate safeguards to ensure the integrity of standards generation and quality assurance processes respectively.

Standards generation in higher education

The framework incorporates a *nested approach* to qualifications design. Within a nested approach to standards setting, qualification specification requires a movement from generic to specific outcomes. The most generic standards are found in the level descriptors. The most specific standards are found in the programmes that lead to qualifications. Specific standards always meet the requirements of the generic standards within which they are nested or framed. Within this broader context, the focus of the HEQF is on qualification type descriptors - the second layer of a nested approach.

The *nested approach* also allows for the appropriate allocation of jurisdictions and responsibilities and can potentially minimise the volume of national standards-setting required for higher education.

The NQF *level* and its *level descriptor* form the outer and most generic layer of qualification specification. The level descriptors describe the required generic competencies at each level of cognitive complexity in the HEQF.

One or more recognised *qualification types* such as a certificate, a diploma or a degree is pegged to each NQF level. A *qualification descriptor* specifies the exit level of the qualification type, its minimum credit rating and its purpose and characteristics. A qualification type must meet the generic competencies described in the level descriptor for the level concerned. The basic qualification types, namely certificates, diplomas and degrees, are used as points of reference for the design of specialised qualifications and the programmes that deliver them.

The next layer of qualification specialisation nested within the qualification type is the *designator*. For example, a Bachelor of Science degree is a designator of the