
GOVERNMENT NOTICE

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

No. 928

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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

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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

generic Bachelor's degree. Such designators apply only to degrees and not to certificates or diplomas. A degree designator describes a generic field of study and is stated in the qualification nomenclature and described through statements of desired educational training and outcomes and their associated assessment criteria. A designator meets the generic specifications laid down for the qualification type of which it is a variant. For example, a Bachelor *of Science* (BSc) complies with the generic requirements for a Bachelor's degree.

The last and most specific layer of qualification specification in the nest, on which most programmes are based, is the *qualification specialisation*. This is reflected in the qualification's *qualifier*. For example, the learning outcomes and specifications for a BSc (Hons) *in Geology* meet the learning demands and specifications laid down for a BSc (Hons) and include specialised learning outcomes related to the field of Geology.

Qualifications, volumes of learning and credits

The framework is a qualifications framework, represented by level descriptors, the main qualification types and their descriptors, qualification standards and designators for designated variants and standards and qualifiers for qualification specialisations.

Level descriptors and qualification descriptors are expressed in terms of learning outcomes. The design of programmes makes assumptions about the volume of learning that is likely to be necessary to achieve the intended outcomes. Currently within the higher education system, this measure of volume may be expressed in terms of study time, for example the number of academic years of study required, or the number of notional hours of study, expressed as credits.

In this regard, this framework recognises credits as the measure of the volume of learning required for a qualification and not academic years of study; quantified as the number of notional study hours required for achieving the learning outcomes specified for the qualification. The credit rating of a qualification is independent of the mode of delivery of learning. The attainment of the expected learning outcomes is demonstrated through appropriate assessment.

The volume of learning required for a qualification can be specified in terms of the *total minimum number of credits* required, and in terms of the *minimum number of credits required at its specified exit level* on the qualifications framework. Where appropriate the maximum number of credits from the preceding level may be specified.

The credit-rating system rates 10 *notional* study hours as equivalent to one credit. Certificate, Diploma, Bachelor's Degree and Bachelor (Honours) Degree qualification types assume a 30-week full-time academic year. Master's Degree and Doctoral qualification types assume a 45-week full-time academic year. An average full-time equivalent student is expected to study for a 40-hour week, thus requiring a minimum credit-load of 120 credits per academic year for Certificates, Diplomas and

Bachelor's Degrees and 180 credits per academic year for Master's Degrees and Doctorates.

Credit ratings specified on the framework are minima. Programmes may require credit loads above the minimum.

Study leading directly to a qualification will normally build upon assessed learning from earlier stages of a programme but it may also build on assessed prior learning achieved by private study, in the workplace or elsewhere.

Accumulation of credits towards qualifications

Credit accumulation and transfer (CAT) is the process whereby a student's achievements are recognised and contribute to further learning even if the student does not achieve a qualification, and whereby credits obtained at one institution may be recognised by another as meeting part of the requirements for a qualification; where credits for an incomplete qualification may be recognised as meeting part of the requirements for a different qualification, and where, subject to limits, credits for a completed qualification may be recognised as meeting part of the requirements of another qualification.

Any and all credits for an incomplete qualification may be recognised as meeting part of the requirements for a different qualification in the same or different institution.

The Ministry of Education intends to undertake systematic work on the development of a national higher education CAT scheme in collaboration with the higher education community, the CHE and SAQA. In the interim, a maximum of 50% credits of a completed qualification may be transferred to another qualification, provided also that no more than 50% of the credits required for the other qualification are credits that have been used for a completed qualification.

Work Integrated Learning

Some qualifications will be designed to incorporate periods of required work that integrate with classroom study. Where Work Integrated Learning (WIL) is a structured part of a qualification the volume of learning allocated to WIL should be appropriate to the purpose of the qualification and to the cognitive demands of the learning outcome and assessment criteria contained in the appropriate level descriptors.

It is the responsibility of institutions, which offer programmes requiring WIL credits to place students into WIL programmes. Such programmes must be appropriately structured, properly supervised and assessed.

THE FRAMEWORK

Characteristics

The higher education qualifications framework is designed to:

- Be sufficiently flexible to accommodate different types of higher education institutions and enable institutions to pursue their own curriculum goals with creativity and innovation;
- Facilitate the education of graduates who will contribute to the social, cultural and economic development of South Africa and participate successfully in the global economy and knowledge society;
- Enhance the development of a vibrant, high quality research system;
- Be compatible with international qualifications frameworks in order to ensure international recognition and comparability of standards;
- Be suitably flexible to accommodate the development of new qualification types and specialisations as the need arises;
- Be simple, clear, easy to understand and user-friendly for the higher education system and its clients;
- Facilitate qualification articulation across the higher education system and assist students to identify potential progression routes, particularly in the context of lifelong learning; and
- Articulate with the rest of the NQF.

Scope and application

The HEQF applies to all higher education institutions, both public and private. It complements other policies of the Minister of Education in higher education.

The HEQF regulates and specifies all higher education qualification types, including qualifications based on unit standards, in the higher education system and their designators and qualifiers, and the manner in which the qualifications are designed and relate to one another. It does not deal with nor does it prejudice the design and registration of unit standards to meet specific learning outcomes.

Number of levels and level descriptors

The National Qualifications Framework has ten levels. Higher education qualifications occupy six levels of the NQF, levels 5 to 10. Levels 5-7 are undergraduate and levels 8-10 are postgraduate.

Each NQF level has a level descriptor. Level descriptors provide guidelines for differentiating the varying levels of complexity of qualifications on the framework.

The level descriptors are the outermost layer of qualification specification. At each level they describe the generic nature of learning achievements and their complexity. Level descriptors are thus broad qualitative statements against which more specific learning outcomes can be developed, compared and located. The positioning of two or more qualifications on the same NQF level only indicates that the qualifications are broadly comparable in terms of the general level of learning achievements. It does not indicate that they have the same purpose, content or outcomes (except at the generic level of critical cross-field outcomes), nor does it necessarily demonstrate equivalence of qualifications.

Qualification types

The framework has nine qualification types mapped onto the six levels of the NQF occupied by higher education qualifications. Some levels have more than one qualification type. The framework comprises the following qualification types:

Undergraduate

- Higher Certificate
- Advanced Certificate
- Diploma
- Advanced Diploma
- Bachelor's Degree

Postgraduate

- Postgraduate Diploma
- Bachelor Honours Degree
- Master's Degree
- Doctoral Degree

The nine qualification types and their designated variants are expected to accommodate present requirements but the list is not immutable. The Minister, on the advice of the CHE, may approve a new qualification type and its unique descriptor when a proven need arises as a result of developments in knowledge production or acknowledged international practice. The use of qualification types is regulated by this policy. A qualification type may only be used if the qualification fulfils the specifications for the type.

Qualification descriptors

Each qualification type has a unique descriptor stating its purpose and how it relates to other qualification types.

Qualification descriptors designate the specifications such as the NQF exit level and credit-rating, purpose and characteristics of qualification types recognised by the framework. Each descriptor is a point of reference, which enables comparisons with other qualifications and provides a basis for designing, approving and reviewing programmes. All qualifications using the same qualification type (and where appropriate, designated variant) in their titles must be consistent with the descriptor for each qualification type as defined in this policy.

Descriptors for the nine qualification types recognised by the framework are at Appendix 1.

Naming of qualifications

The *qualification type* is the first name given to a qualification.

The *designator* is the second name given to a qualification, to indicate its broad area of study, discipline or profession. All degrees (Bachelor, Master and Doctor) have designated variants of the degree type, but designators are not used for certificates and diplomas. The linking word between the qualification type and the designator is *of* (e.g. Bachelor *of* Social Science), and when abbreviated the 'of' is omitted (e.g. BSocS).

The Council on Higher Education (CHE), is hereby mandated in terms of section 5(1)(f) of the Higher Education Act to determine and publish the criteria to be applied in adopting degree designators and qualifiers, including exceptions as appropriate. No designator or qualifier may be used in a qualification unless it is consistent with the criteria determined by the CHE in terms of this policy. In registering standards for higher education qualifications, SAQA will ensure that the naming of higher education qualifications, including degree designators, are consistent with this policy, to ensure that the nomenclature of higher education qualifications is applied consistently.

The third name given to a qualification type is the *qualifier*. Qualifiers may be used in all qualification types in order to indicate a field of specialisation. The linking word between the qualification type or its designator and the qualifier is always *in* (e.g. Bachelor of Arts *in Linguistics*, Bachelor of Engineering *in Electronics*). When abbreviated, the *in* is dropped and the qualifier is placed in brackets (e.g. BA (*Linguistics*), BEng (*Electronics*)). Bachelors degrees may include a second qualifier. The second *qualifier* qualifies the first. An example would be a Bachelor of Science in Engineering in Electronics. When abbreviated, the *in* is dropped and the qualifiers are placed in brackets, e.g. BSc (*Eng*) (*Electronics*). The CHE will determine all

primary qualifiers for bachelor's degrees, honours and masters degrees, and institutions may add secondary qualifiers.

In the case of qualifications where there is no designator, the qualifier follows immediately after the qualification type (e.g. Postgraduate Diploma *in Drama*, abbreviated to PG Dip (Drama)).

A further area of specialisation for a qualification may be indicated as above; *in* being the linking word to the *second qualifier* (e.g. Postgraduate Diploma in Drama in *Performance*, abbreviated to PG Dip (Drama) (*Performance*)).

In order to use a qualifier, at least 50% of the minimum total credits for the qualification and at least 50% of the minimum credits at the qualification's exit level must be in the field of specialisation denoted by the qualifier. The same applies to the use of a second qualifier. Qualifiers and second qualifiers are attached to a qualification type and designators are subject to the criteria set by the CHE.

Qualifications and academic transcripts

Award of qualifications

Qualifications are awarded to mark the achievement of defined outcomes. No qualification may be awarded as compensation for a student's failure at a higher level, or by default.

Issue of transcripts

An academic transcript is not a qualification but a document issued by an institution to provide a descriptive record of the learning a student has achieved at that institution, whether or not a qualification has been awarded.

If a student is unable to complete a qualification and must exit the institution, an academic transcript of the student's record will assist the admitting authorities if the student wishes to complete the qualification later or register for a different qualification. A transcript issued by a higher education institution must be a full academic record of the student concerned at that institution.

Language of qualification certificates and academic transcripts

The language of each qualification certificate and transcript issued to a student within the South African higher education system must be consistent with the Ministry of Education's *Language Policy for Higher Education* (Pretoria, November 2002) and the approved language policy of the issuing institution. A central aspect of the Ministry's policy is the promotion of multilingualism.

To enable employers, academic institutions, parents and others (including international academic institutions or employers) to understand the achievements

and attributes represented by a qualification title, a certificate or transcript must be issued in English in addition to any other official language.

The use of Latin in qualification certificates has been practised by some South African institutions as a historical legacy. Its continued use for this purpose is not encouraged but is left to the discretion of individual institutions. A certificate in Latin must also be in English in addition to any other official language.

Transcript supplement

In order to improve the portability and transparency of qualifications, each transcript issued by a higher education institution to a current or former student must have attached to it an official supplement. The supplement must provide a description of the nature, level, content and where appropriate the context of the studies pursued by a student and assessed by the institution. The Minister of Education will propose the format and use of the supplement after consultation with higher education institutions and on advice from the Council on Higher Education.

Admission to higher education

The framework is intended to facilitate articulation between further and higher education and within higher education. However, the possession of a qualification does not guarantee a student's progression and admission to a programme of study.

In terms of the Higher Education Act, 1997 the decision to admit a student to higher education study is the right and responsibility of the higher education institution concerned. A higher education institution's admissions policy and practice is expected to advance the objectives of the Act and the NQF and must be consistent with this policy.

The minimum requirement for admission to a higher education institution from 1 January 2009 is the National Senior Certificate, whose specifications were approved by the Minister of Education in the document *National Senior Certificate – A qualification at level 4 on the National Qualifications Framework* published in the *Government Gazette*, Vol. 481, No. 27819, July 2005. Given the diversity of programmes and qualifications in higher education, the Minister has declared as policy the *Minimum Admission Requirements for Higher Certificate, Diploma and Bachelor's Degree Programmes requiring a National Senior Certificate*, published in the *Government Gazette*, Vol. 482, No. 27961, August 2005. These minima must be met by all applicants to entry level higher education qualifications. Applicants with different qualifications may only be admitted in they are judged equivalent by the designated equivalence-setting bodies.

Progression within the framework

The framework is designed to facilitate vertical, horizontal and diagonal progression. Vertical progression is the norm and the minimum requirements for such progression between qualification types are stipulated in the qualification type descriptors. Students may progress horizontally between qualifications if they meet the minimum requirements for admission to the target qualification. Students may progress diagonally between qualifications by presenting a completed qualification or credits towards a qualification in a cognate study area, and must meet the minimum requirements for admission to the target qualification, which they will often do by virtue of the credits obtained towards a cognate qualification.

The general principle must be that the admitting institution is satisfied that the applicant has competence in the appropriate field of intended study at the appropriate entry level of the target qualification.

The point of entry in the target programme must be such that at least 120 or 180 credits, for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes respectively, are undertaken at the exit level. For example, a student may present a Higher Certificate for admission to the second year of a cognate Diploma programme, or a student may be admitted to the second year of a cognate Bachelor's degree programme after completing the first year of study of a Diploma programme, or a student who has completed academic credits towards one qualification may be exempted from certain requirements in a cognate qualification, or a Master's student's candidature may be upgraded to a Doctoral programme. In all cases, the admitting institution must be satisfied that the applicant has the necessary competence.

With due regard to the policies, requirements and guidelines of the HEQC, institutions may recognise other forms of prior learning as equivalent to the prescribed minimum admission requirements, and may recognise other forms of prior learning for entry to given programmes. In this regard, vertical progression is possible where a person with a given qualification adds to that which is required to gain entry to a higher qualification type. In all cases, the admitting institution must be satisfied that the applicant has the necessary competence.

In the interest of transparency, each higher education institution must clearly stipulate the requirements that must be satisfied for admission and make these requirements publicly accessible.

With regard to a student who fails to complete the requirements for a qualification, the general principle is that this student may not be awarded an early-exit qualification. For example, a student who fails to meet the requirements for a Master's degree may not be awarded a Postgraduate Diploma in lieu of the Master's degree.

IMPLEMENTATION AND TRANSITIONAL ARRANGEMENTS

Implementation date

The implementation date for this policy is 1 January 2009. However, higher education institutions will need some time to phase out their existing qualifications in terms of this policy, so there will be a transition period to full compliance. The Minister of Education shall determine the date by notice in the Government Gazette.

Programmes and qualifications

New programmes and qualifications

A new programme or qualification is one which has not existed before or has been significantly changed, such as when its purpose, outcomes, field of study, mode or site of delivery has been changed to a considerable extent.

New higher education qualifications submitted for registration on the NQF must conform to the requirements of this policy from the date of implementation, 1 January 2009.

Institutions must ensure that new programmes scheduled to begin in 2009 meet the requirements of this policy.

Existing programmes and qualifications

Existing qualifications are those that have been registered or interim registered on the NQF prior to the promulgation of this policy. Existing programmes are those that lead to such qualifications and have been accredited by the HEQC or the former Universities and Technikons Advisory Council (AUT), or its predecessors.

Existing qualifications and programmes that are currently offered by higher education institutions must conform over time with the requirements of this policy or must be de-registered and withdrawn. The Minister of Education will determine appropriate transitional arrangements after consultation with the Council on Higher Education, the South African Qualifications Authority and higher education institutions.

Admission to higher education

New programmes

From 1 January 2009 the minimum admission requirement for entry to new programmes will be as set out in Gazette notice number 27961 of August 2005.

Existing programmes

From 1 January 2009 and until the date determined by the Minister in terms of this section the following will apply:

- The minimum admission requirements for *Higher Certificate* will be used for admission to the *National Certificate* as defined in NATED Report 150
- The minimum admission requirements for *Diploma* will be used for admission to the *National Diploma* and the *University Diploma* as defined in NATED Report 150 and 116 respectively.
- The minimum admission requirements for *Bachelor's Degree* will be used for admission to the *Bachelor's Degree* as defined in NATED Report 116.

Full compliance

All higher education programmes and qualifications and all higher education admission policies must comply with this policy by a date determined by the Minister by notice in the *Government Gazette*.

