



Directorate of National Standards and Reviews

GUIDELINES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF QUALIFICATION STANDARDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Introduction

Policy and Legislative context

In terms of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Act, 67 of 2008, the Council on Higher Education (CHE) is the Quality Council (QC) for Higher Education. The CHE through the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) is responsible for the quality assurance of higher education qualifications. The CHE is also mandated, in terms of the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF), to develop standards for higher education qualifications. Standards development is aligned with the nested approach incorporated in the HEQSF. In this approach, the outer layer providing the context for qualification standards are the NQF level descriptors developed by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) in agreement with the relevant QC.

The development of standards is an important element in contributing to the successful implementation of the HESQF, as standards provide benchmarks to guide the development, implementation, and quality assurance of programmes leading to qualifications. Standards registered for higher education qualifications must have legitimacy, credibility, and common, well-understood meaning.

(HEQSF, as revised, January 2013)

The development of qualification standards is guided by the principles, protocols, and methodology outlined in the **Framework**, approved by the Council in March 2013. The focus of a standards statement is the relationship between the purpose of the qualification, the attributes of a graduate that manifest the purpose, and the contexts and conditions for the assessment of those attributes. A standard establishes a threshold. The standards development mandate also considers alignment to the HEQSF and other imperatives of access, articulation, progression, portability, and public accountability.

A Framework for Qualification Standards in Higher Education (CHE, January 2013)

https://nr-online-1.che.ac.za/html_documents/2.Framework%20Qualification%20Standards%20Development_2015.pdf

A qualification standard is a statement that indicates how the purpose of the qualification, and the level on the NQF at which it is awarded, are represented in the learning domains, assessment

contexts, and graduate attributes that are typical for the award of the qualification. The aim of the standards development process is to explore the extent to which the principles, procedures, content, and methodology of standards development meet the requirements of all relevant parties: the institutions awarding the qualifications, the CHE as quality assurer of the qualifications, the graduates of those qualifications; their prospective employers; and any relevant professional council or association. The standard is, therefore, cognisant of academic as well as professional interests. When a professional qualification standard is developed, representation from the relevant professional body is essential, as the standards are informed by professional requirements. The synergy between academic and professional interests may enhance the level of work readiness of the graduates.

It is important to note that there is a distinction between standards for higher education qualifications and the criteria determined by a professional body for conferring on an individual a professional designation. Professional registration usually affirms proven competence to perform in a specific work context. In some cases, workplace competence is demonstrated within the qualification, in other cases, beyond the qualification. The standards statement should therefore clearly articulate this under the section on context and conditions for assessment.

It is also important to note that higher education institutions have been mandated to award qualifications, and therefore, responsibility for the quality assurance of programmes leading to the award. The qualification standard respects the autonomy of higher education institutions to design, deliver and assess programmes that lead to the institutional award, on the condition that they meet the standards for the relevant qualification type.

The Framework recommends the following stages in the development of a standard.

Stage one

The need for a qualification standard(s) may be triggered by several factors, including requests from the higher education sector, changes in policy or legislation, quality-related complaints from employers/students, changes in professional/work competency requirements, and the introduction of new knowledge areas, etc. In consultation with the broader stakeholder community, academics, and professional bodies in the relevant field of study, the CHE investigates the felt need for a standard. And based on the outcome of the stakeholder consultation process, may recommend the need for the development of a particular qualification type standard (or types), in a particular field of study to the HEQC. Subject to the approval of the proposal by the HEQC, stage two of the process then commences.

Stage two

The drafting of qualification standards statement is the work of a Community of Practice comprising of academic experts in the field of study/discipline, and/or experts in professional practice convened by the CHE. Members of the Standards Development Working Group participate in their individual capacity, not as representatives of any institution or organisation.

The CHE selects a group of experts in the field, who will form the core of a standards development working group. The Group is selected on the following basis:

- 1) It starts with a call for nominations of persons who will be willing to serve as members of the standards development working group. Ideally, the group in addition to the expertise in the discipline knowledge area will also comprise a wide range of expertise, from programme supervision, curriculum development, course teaching, professional practice, and any forms of associated internship.
- 2) Although members may be approached by the CHE as individuals, it is preferable for group members to be nominated by Deans of Faculties (or, through them, by Heads of Schools or Departments) and/or the relevant professional body or sector.

Whether nominated or invited directly, it is important to note that members of the working group participate as independent academic experts; they do not represent an institution or any interest group.

The CHE recommends a working group of 8-16 academic experts, but this range could be reviewed should the need arise. However, a significantly larger group is unlikely to be as productive in this early stage of drafting.

The nominated and selected individuals are invited by the CHE to participate in an initial workshop (preferably over two days). During the workshop, the basic ground is covered, identifying areas of agreement and of difference as well as areas in which further investigation or research is needed, and the first steps are taken in drafting a standards statement. The workshop concludes by deciding on the next steps to be taken, and a provisional timeline for the development process.

Subject to the views of members of the proposed working group, the CHE suggests a timeline for the process, it takes 12 -18 months to complete the process. The CHE recognises the institutional and other pressures under which members of the working groups work. Participation in the working group would not automatically imply an unlimited continuation of individuals' involvement in the process. However, the CHE hopes that an acknowledgment of the importance of the required expertise, and the benefits of standards development to the field of study and the profession, will encourage participants to assist the CHE in taking the process to its conclusion.

Third stage

- 1) Once the working group is satisfied with a draft standards statement (this is likely to require several iterations), and thus has reached a consensus, the draft is referred to the National Standards and Reviews Committee (NSRC) (a sub-Committee of the HEQC). The task of this Committee is largely to advise the HEQC of CHE on the levels of consistency between standards developed in different fields of study and disciplines for the same qualification type across different pathways. Any questions or issues raised by the Committee would be referred to the expert working group

for consideration.

- 2) Once endorsed by both the working group and the NSRC, the draft standards statement is sent to all interested parties in higher education and the profession (HEIs, academic bodies, professional bodies, relevant state bodies) for narrow consultation. The comment received is considered in detail by the relevant standards development working group. Once all comment has been processed, and further drafting is undertaken, the revised draft standards statement is presented to the NSRC for further consideration and endorsement for the final consultation stage.
- 3) The final consultation stage is a call for public comment on the revised draft standard often disseminated on the CHE website and any other platform deemed necessary. The public comment stage ensures that the broader stakeholder community has an opportunity to review the content of a standard prior to its approval. The draft is made available to the public for comment for a minimum of 30 days. All comments from the public are considered in detail by the relevant standards development working group, if necessary, further drafting is undertaken to accommodate responses to the comments. This iteration of the draft standard is once again tabled at the NSRC for final consideration and recommendation to the HEQC for approval.
- 4) The approved qualification standard is disseminated to the higher education sector and/or profession to inform academic programme and curriculum design, evaluation, and review. The approved standard will be posted on the CHE website for the public to have access to it.

NOTE The working group would normally meet on several occasions during development process, resulting in several iterations and revisions of the draft. The outcome of this reflexive generative approach is a standard statement that cognisant of both academic and professional interests.