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Making NQF's operational in a changing world
Session 2: Keynote Speech
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Good morning,

Introduction (slide 2: Changed and Changing)

Let me start off by asking you to think about a young person in your life; mid to late-20's if you have one. If you don't have one, think about yourself at that age.

I remember myself at that time to be

- Accepting (very slowly) that I didn't know everything (and in doing so becoming hungry to learn more)
- Becoming mature and responsible (although I still had a lot of maturing to do)
- But mostly I was changed and still changing… In fact, I'm not the same person today that I was those 15 years ago.

This is exactly the phase that the 27-year-old South African NQF is in today, a little battered and bruised after the pandemic, but largely finding that it has become mature and more reflective about its aspirations and abilities in a world that asks much more of it than before.

There is an acute understanding that this phase of its existence will not look like it did when the NQF was newly birthed in 1998, nor when it went through its troublesome teen years in the transition from bands to subframeworks and from 8 to 10 levels around 2009. This more mature NQF has been carved into three differentiated subframeworks and each of these components of the NQF are driven by its own logic and requirements, sometimes uniting the NQF and at other times pulling it in different directions. Becoming the person you are to be, with all the facets of your character fully formed and complimentary, is a long process of change and growth, which does not stop. Lifelong learning applies to NQF's as surely as it does to each of us.

(Slide 3: Change)

Our NQFs and qualifications systems are operating in a world that has changed and is changing in significant ways and at an exponential pace and this evolution calls on our qualifications systems to respond in very different ways than it did in the past, irrespective of the age of our systems and NQFs.

It is for us as leaders of systems and frameworks now to seize the opportunities gifted to us by the pandemic and automation and other disrupters; the opportunity to rethink, redesign and reimagine the possibilities. We have been given the gift of opportunity to be visionary in our aspirations for what the next few decades of NQFs will look like on our continent.

The driving purpose of our NQF 27 years ago was to reject Apartheid education (both Bantu and the education for oppressors) and make consistent and transparent, the offering of democratic education in our country.

Today, our SAQA mandate has been streamlined to remove quality assurance and focus on qualification and professional registration and our driving purpose is the coordination of the eco-system. We have changed significantly and we continue to change, but this is not always evident to the world outside and sometimes I fear, creates false promises for the aspirations of our neighbours and friends.

Why are NQF's so popular (slide 4: Map)

Even with the tensions and challenges of implementing our NQF's which might range from contestations of over regulation, lack of impact and the cost of the system, NQF's and regional Qualifications Frameworks continue to flourish. Our research tells us that over 80% of the world (that's approximately 160 countries) are implementing qualifications frameworks, or qualifications systems (SAQA, 2021, unpublished).

In my own humble opinion this is because of one, fundamental characteristic of an NQF – the ability to act as a communication and translation device.

We see NQF's being used to create transparency for both national learning and progression but also, increasingly, for international comparability and recognition (Lester, 2011 (Lauder, 2011; Pilz, 2017) and Raffe, 2011).

Lester (2011) argues that Qualifications frameworks "bring coherence to burgeoning and complex qualifications markets, provide clearer information to learners about access and progression, provide formal recognition of previous learning, and facilitate comparison of qualifications" (Lester, 2011, p. 205)

(Wheelahan, 2011) argues that the economic imperative of labour market demand drives NQF development, but she also concedes that the NQF provides a quality mechanism that leads to user confidence and trust in the system.

It is evident therefore that NQFs are here to stay, although I will argue later that they must evolve if they are to remain relevant.

Interestingly, these frameworks are implemented contrary to much academic objection. Pilcher et al, 2017, wrote that NQF policy development is 'influenced by rhetoric, and implemented through policy borrowing, without considering differences in contexts, and without always understanding all aspects of how the framework was developed and implemented(Pilcher et al., 2017, p. 4) and David Raffe, of Scotland, warns that the Scottish NQF is built on many preceding years of education reform in Scotland resulting in a situation where "Scotland can offer lessons, but not models" (Raffe, 2007, p. 501).

This leads me to my first key message today, which is that our NQF's are products of their context. (Slide 5: Context matters)

Inherent in the deeply contextualised nature, NQF's tend to be 'more than representations of qualifications… they include systems, institutions, and relationships between institutions" (Allais, 2018, p. 12). According to Raffe, "qualifications and Qualifications Framework's are social constructs and the social and political factors which shape their development and impact are ultimately more important than 'technical' issues such as learning outcomes, level descriptors and

quality assurance systems. NQFs potentially redistribute power and control" (Raffe, 2011, p. 299). Although that was written by a Scottish pen, the principles are true on our continent, in that our NQF's have largely served imperatives of social justice; aiming to redistribute the power of education and create access and mobility for all.

Of course, there are challenges and tensions and clearly we should be wary of simply borrowing NQF principles, but my argument will be, that there are rich lessons that NQFs of every age can offer in their experience of implementation and that sharing these lessons can support the contextualised and impactful implementation of responsive NQFs in local and regional spaces. Even Raffe concludes that his 'analysis suggests therefore that different types of NQF may be effective in different circumstances" (Raffe, 2011, p. 298).

This introduces my second key message: NQF's cannot be static (Slide 6)

The circumstances of today are not those of 27 years ago and we agree that our NQF's are part of ecosystems within specific contexts and so, if we want responsive and impactful NQF's, we must concede that NQF's should respond to their evolving context.

(Pilcher et al., 2017) reminds us that "NQFs change over time" and (Raffe, 2011) adds that NQF's are "inherently dynamic. A transformational framework which achieves its transformational ambitions may move closer to the ideal type of a communications framework as it increasingly describes the existing system" ((Raffe, 2011, p. 386)

So, we should accept that even if we have relatively good, robust models, our NQF's are compelled to change and adapt over time and circumstance, to remain valuable and transformative.

This brings me to my final message and a few recommendations, where I reflect on whether qualifications systems are ready to embrace and enable change in society, learning and work? (Slide 7: Are systems ready)

If you have accepted my argument thus far (and you're still awake), then you would appreciate that NQFs are societal instruments that are contextualised and evolving.

So my broad conclusion shouldn't be a surprise; that as an ever evolving instrument, it is both possible and imperative for NQF's to embrace and enable change in the society in which it operates.

Our NQF's have always been tools of social justice and as our contexts change, so too does the very definition of social justice. Many years ago it might have been about racial parity, today its rather about class parity. Our compass of justice keeps moving with the world and therefore the instrument that we navigate with, our NQFs are compelled to evolve.

Whether we are ready or not is simply irrelevant. If we don't respond to our changing context we will find ourselves regulating areas that affect only small parts of our population, rendering us irrelevant.

Let me underscore this point with a quick segue into food preservation. I credit this analogy to Ms Zanele Njapha, the 'Unlearning Lady'.

Let us think about the history of food preservation. **(slide 8: Food Preservation and Video)**

Before electricity and refrigeration people would harvest ice, store ice blocks in icehouses fashioned specifically for the purpose, and transport the ice great distances to the homes of families who would use the ice to keep their food fresh.

The icehouse practice evolved into refrigeration by the 1920's and we have seen tremendous innovation in refrigeration over the decades. We now have smart fridges that allow our appliance to talk directly to the retailer to ensure that we always have fresh produce at our disposal.

But, the evolution of food preservation today, has taken a very interesting turn…
instead of smarter fridges or smaller fridges or even fridges that clean themselves…
the future of food preservation is this: https://www.weforum.org/videos/22863-this-
silk-coating-keeps-your-food-fresh-for-longer/

So, if we keep trying to make our qualifications systems smarter and faster, we might
miss opportunities to change our systems for the better. The qualifications system
we have today cannot look like the one we had in 1998 in South Africa and it is up to
all of us, as leaders in the systems, to ensure that we are open to the opportunities
to enable and embrace change.

I hope at this stage that you are convinced of the need to embrace and enable
change, so I offer a few recommendations
(Slide 9: Recommendations)

1. Understand your changing context - we need to know and agree with
   stakeholders, what society, work and learning expect of us and what we can
   reasonably deliver. Unless you live in a magic bubble, your context would
   have changed pre-pandemic to now and you need to be mindful and
   managing changing needs and expectations
   We could do so through research and consulting nationally, but also by
   ensuring we are always plugged into the international and continental
   discourses like this one, from which we take insights as and when they are
   relevant to us.

2. Operationalise and enhance tools for skills recognition and mobility - Between
   2000 and 2019, the number of international migrants within **Africa** jumped
   from 15.1 million to 26.6 million, a 76 percent **rise**, the sharpest **increase** of
   any world region, according to the International Organization for Migration.
   According to the Washing Post, the majority of African migrants, both rich and
   poor, do not cross oceans, but rather land borders within Africa.

   So how do we move from systems that exclude migrants and hinder mobility
   to systems that make genuine efforts to recognise all learning from everyone.

In this case I offer two tools or enablers 1) the continental and global conventions and their connections to regional and national qualifications frameworks and 2) technology.

    a. Where conventions, such as the Addis Convention, are in place, they compel NQFs to consider skills from outside their borders. In implementing the intentions of the Convention, NQF's can be referenced to regional and continental qualifications framework so that recognition can be deepened and strengthened at a country to country level through bilaterals and Mutual Recognition of Qualifications Agreements.

    b. Of course these agreements are built on mutual understanding and trust, which can be enhanced continentally through active and sustainable networks that connect our organisations and enable the mobility of skills. Utilising existing platforms such as the ACQF meetings, the emerging TVET network and the AQVN platform which was established in 2014 to promote genuine qualifications, can be powerful tools of collaboration.

    c. Secondly, we need to think about how to enhance interoperability and secure transfer of learning achievement information on this continent. Here I look to Kenya and others who can lead the way and I note that connected information centres are already an objective of the ACQF II project. But we need to think about how such functionality will fundamentally change our purpose and our functions

3. Enable future skills – we see an urgent need for qualifications in emerging areas such as green skills and digitalisation, but we also see the changing ways that skills are being developed and ours is to enable through regulation, not stifle.

    a. A wise woman, said that we do not inherit our Planet - we borrow it from our children and grand-children, so then what are we, who have authority in qualification registration, doing to advocate and take responsibility to ensure that our processes enable the agile movement to green and other forms of emerging skills?.

b. Future skills are increasingly being packaged as microcredentials. I don't have enough time today to tell you what I really think about microcredentials, but I will concede that the phenomenon offers new opportunities for lifelong learning and flexibility and are critically, linked to labour market needs. Regulation is necessary for trust and recognition but overregulation will break the system, so how are we all responding, and how will we respond to the next innovation as we see AI increasingly incorporated into learning, teaching and assessment?

c. Indigenous knowledge: yes, as a future skill, we should not forget that for young people to truly be positioned in and for their country and the continent, requires them to have a personal relationship with knowledge from this continent. We need to ensure that the colonial vestiges are laid bare and that qualifications embed the true stories and values of our local and continental cultures and history. So that our children know and understand that they are children of Africa.

4. Be open to scrutiny and self-reflection – we should not be afraid or embarrassed to reflect and be self-critical. When SAQA initiated a review of our NQF, people immediately challenged the idea because they interpreted this as the death of the South African NQF. How could that be? How can an instrument of change and transformation not constantly be improving and transforming itself? Reviews are essential for us to lift into the light all the things that we want to enhance and things that no longer serve us. I will soon be asking my counterparts in the first generation Qualifications Authority and those from the SADC region to think with me to conceptualise an institutional review. This is so that I may be alerted to things that I didn't know, I didn't know. To blindspots and habits that need to change. How fascinating it will be to see my institution and framework through the lens of Namibia, Zambia or Mauritius!

5. Finally, we need to use the collective. As Africans we should be proud that we have the first continental framework, the first meta-framework of regional frameworks. We have our Kenyan Qualifications Authority who have self-developed a very advanced qualifications register based on blockchain

technology, we have our colleagues in Cabo Verde who have successfully referenced to the EQF, Egypt, Morocco, Ghana, Senegal, Cabo Verde, Cameroon and Mozambique have strengthened Competence-Based Training (CBT) in their TVET systems, which in principle closes the gap between education and training outcomes and Labour market needs… Now is our time to think and work together to ensure our collective successes and in particular the success of our ACQF, so that we can offer this learning to the rest of the world and claim our rightful place as qualification systems Royalty. Our diversity is our strength if we share, learn and draw inspiration and lessons from other country experiences.

I offer these only as a few suggestions, they may be many others, potentially more impactful… but I do hope that while I may not have all the answers, I might have inspired you all to start asking the right questions and sharing your insights so that Africa can rise, together.

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