

Draft Discussion Paper

Towards an enhanced Policy on Progression and Articulation

within the context of the NQF of Namibia

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May 2014

Introduction

1. Learners should and must have an expectation to progress into and through the qualification system. This is fundamental to the principles of lifelong learning inherent in the Namibian education and training philosophies. Authorities, provider institutions and organisations should act to ensure that this expectation is protected.
2. It is an imperative, therefore, that clear and coherent information is available to all learners on the types of pathways that they could reasonably expect to follow upon the award of any specific qualification. Such progression could be made possible through formal articulation and/or credit transfer arrangements.
3. *Articulation* commonly refers to movements from a completed qualification to another with admission and/or credit. It thus involves relationships between whole qualifications. *Credit transfer* arrangements are slightly different in that they recognise attainments from components of qualifications.
4. Articulation and credit transfer can be viewed as being *horizontal* within the NQF where qualifications or components of qualifications at the same NQF Level are involved. Alternatively, the systems could be *vertical* where the relationship is between a qualification or components with another qualification or components at a higher NQF Level.
5. Progression and articulation can involve qualifications from the same qualification system or qualifications from different qualification systems.
6. Articulation and credit transfer systems can both be viewed as having *systemic* characteristics in that they can be given effect within national systems such as the NQF. Both can also be viewed as being *specific* – they are reliant on being administered through agreements between parties. The systems can be both *intra-provider* and *inter-provider*. Ideally, the operational principles should be the same whatever the context.
7. The NQF of Namibia represents a single, coordinated qualification system. It is designed to encompass attainment through general, vocational, work-based, and higher learning. The NQF Regulations (Annexure G) state that all qualifications should adhere to the principle of accessibility. The requirements stated for any qualification should optimise:
 - access to those seeking the qualification
 - progression through the qualification
 - articulation and the transfer of learning to other qualifications, both vertically and horizontally.
8. The NQF is constructed with a number of features designed to enable learner progression and transfer of learning attainments:

- the NQF Levels and Descriptors are cumulative in terms of heightened abilities in the cognitive, psychomotive and personal attribute domains
 - the qualification types follow an accepted, hierarchical nomenclature
 - the specification of characteristics of qualification types (including the identification and expression of learning outcomes) facilitates considerations of the comparability of qualifications
 - the NQF Credit system provides a currency mechanism to facilitate transfer of abilities where transfer is appropriate.
9. The development of articulation pathways includes the adoption of accepted Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) principles and processes and systems that promote and support credit accumulation and transfer (CAT) systems. Both RPL and CAT systems guide the movement of people within and between non-completed qualifications. The NQF can, and should be, central to guiding the movement of people between completed qualifications. For now, it is probably the best available technology for *inter-provider* transactions.
10. Articulation and credit transfers are also dependent on the trust given to any reports of attainment. Thus, the credibility of statements of quality rests on the rigour and independence given to assurances of such quality. The Registration and Accreditation processes administered by the NQA, NTA and the NCHE are, therefore, pivotal to articulation and credit transfer processes. If there is diminished commitment to and acceptance of the outcomes of Registration and Accreditation, then the expectations of learners to progression, admission and advanced placement will be blunted.
11. Within Namibia, articulation and credit transfer is not working as optimally as envisaged within the NQF and national quality assurance contexts. This may be a result of the relative 'new-ness' of the NQF and assurance system. It may also be because there are more provider-based qualifications than nationally-agreed qualifications – making it cumbersome to agree on exchanges. It is likely that there is also some provider-resistance or hesitations in promoting and administering articulation and transfer arrangements between providers in such a manner that gives best benefits to learners in their life-long learning pursuits.

Transfer of 'credits'

12. In a Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT) system, credits can be recognised and then potentially contribute to further learning, especially when there is incomplete qualification attainment. These credits may be recognised by the same or different provider institutions or organisations for the same or for a different qualification. The recognition is, however, not always automatic. Any mobility of credits may be dependent on curriculum requirements and specifications.
13. This dependency is also seen within the unit standard system of the NQF. The context of attainment for an individual unit standard could be significant to the attainment – the attainment may be *domain-specific*. Most unit standards represent generic and contextually-specific abilities. The generic ability may have been demonstrated in a particular context or environment. Thus, though the generic ability could be transferred, the generic competency is only a component of the total credits awarded. The NQF does not allow for partial credit transfers.
14. For these reasons, credit transfer systems need to have a degree of flexibility within them. This flexibility should not, however, be used by a 'receiving provider' to preclude transfer without there being a thorough exploration of the opportunity for recognition to be granted to the learner. This exploration should be inclusive of the two principle parties – the one who 'generated' the ability that is potentially transferable and the one who could 'receive' the transfer.
15. Current credit transfer policy in the Namibian NQF, that of the Republic of South Africa, and in New Zealand, etc, is that credit transfer should be limited to 50% from a completed qualification towards another qualification. This percentage could, however, be reviewed at any time. The principal rationale for this (or any) stated limit was to prevent multiple qualifications being awarded for the same work undertaken by the learner. It is also important that qualifications designed for a specific purpose do not become embedded within a qualification that has been designed to meet a different purpose. The limitation on transfer is also a mechanism to protect the awarding standards upheld in each provider institution or organisation.
16. There should, perhaps, be an acceptance that exceptions to the transfer limits be permitted on a case-by-case basis where transfer suitability is proven by the recipient qualification developer.
17. Transfer in the case of incomplete qualifications is commonly facilitated through the use of transcripts (the NQF Regulations – Annexure G – requires the availability of an *informative* transcript of attainments making up a whole qualification). A transcript does not represent a qualification. It is a descriptive record of learning and attainment within a qualification. The transcript can assist an *admitting* institution or organisation to place a

learner in a continuation of the qualification and/or the undertaking of a different qualification.

18. Any transcript should be highly informative so as to optimise transfer and progression. For example:

- the learner must be fully identified
- the issuing provider or organisation must be fully identified
- the person authorised to issue the transcript
- the NQF identifier for the relevant qualification, the exit Level, and any NQF Classification category
- the NQF identifier for any component (where relevant) OR the NQF Level and Credit value for any completed, non-registered component of a full qualification (ie, as listed in the registration document of the relevant qualification)
- achievement of the learner (credits awarded, grade and/or mark).

Where possible, the transcript for non-NQF registered components should be supplemented with descriptive information on the nature, level, content and, if appropriate, context of the studies pursued and assessed.

Articulation arrangements

19. As noted in the Introduction, articulation is commonly referred to as being formal relationships between whole qualifications. This interpretation places, perhaps, unnecessary constraints on articulations and progressions.
20. The cumulative nature of the NQF Levels Descriptors signals that abilities at one Level would likely equip people to commence studies at the next or, perhaps, higher Levels. Thus, attainment of a qualification at a Level may also signal broader readiness for entry rather than into a specified qualification(s).
21. Articulation routes should not, therefore, be based solely on the subject matter of specific qualifications but also by any qualification type permitted at each Level. Thus, entry to a Masters degree could be from any qualification at Level 8 (perhaps 7) rather than just an Honours degree. That is, postgraduate diplomas may well equip people for progression into Masters studies, especially for those Masters degrees that have a professional orientation. At the higher Levels of the NQF there may be constraints arising from the special purpose (eg, those of a 'professional' nature) of the higher qualifications, especially the degrees. Attainment at a lower level may be required to be in the same cognate area or professional field.

22. There may be other constraints. For example, the Namibian Senior Secondary Certificate (Grade 12) remains an essentially general, academic qualification. Studies towards the subjects assessed for this qualification may not be useful preparation for vocational careers. This is perhaps why questions are asked when those having Grade 12 often qualify for a vocational qualification at a lower level than that at which Grade 12 is accepted to be aligned. It must also be remembered that qualifications are awarded at an *exit* level of the NQF. Attainment at this exit level does not necessarily mean new learning for a new, advanced qualification will always start at a NQF Level above that at which an earlier qualification has been registered.
23. In some cases, a qualification may be stand-alone. This does not mean that it is a 'dead-end' qualification – just that there is no specific qualification identifiable on a progression route. In such cases, however, attainment of the qualification represents attainment up to and at the broad level of ability described for the NQF Level at which the qualification is registered – its exit level of attainment. Such an attainment should arguably be used as evidence of being able to perform at the broad level of that exit level. It is not, however, an indicator of readiness to progress further in a specific cognate, vocational or professional field.
24. Credits at a particular Level represent attainment at a common, broad level of cognitive and skills attainment. There is a commonality in complexity. However, credits are not necessarily interchangeable within a Level as they may reflect attainment associated with the broad purpose of a specific qualification – general academic, professional and career-focused. In South Africa, for example, there are suggestions that Level 5 Certificate credits may be very much career-focused – they have a strong employment orientation. They may not be similar to Level 5 credits in a degree programme which is more likely to be academic or professionally orientated. Thus, the credits at a same Level may have a greater orientation to certain domains of the generic outcomes of learning expressed in the Levels Descriptors. This could, therefore, constrain progression and articulation.
25. There are growing realisations in the international qualifications community that programmes and qualifications can have different orientations – general, vocational, academic, professional and career. In a broad way, different qualification types may be more commonly appropriate to different orientations. That is, Certificates and Diplomas are perceived as being more typical in general, vocational and career orientations. Degrees are perceived as being more typical in academic and professional orientations.
26. At the heart of any progression systems and articulation routes are the setting, maintenance and verification/assurance of standards applicable to the design of courses, teaching and learning, and assessment. The rigour of quality assurance often provides the true test for the adoption and success of any articulation (or credit transfer) arrangements.

27. Must be an acceptance of the diversity and innovation principles associated with the autonomy of provider institutions and organisations to design teaching and learning pathways that are commensurate with their visions, missions, goals and objectives whilst meeting the needs and expectations of their various stakeholders and communities of interest. Diversity and differentiation can be characteristics of learning pathways – yet the reporting of attainment must have a high degree of consistency and uniformity.
28. Articulation systems need to have a degree of flexibility within them. This flexibility should not, however, be used by a ‘receiving provider’ to preclude articulation without there being a thorough exploration of the opportunity for recognition to be granted to the learner. This exploration should be inclusive of the two principle parties – the one who ‘generated’ the qualification that is able to potentially be articulated and the one who could ‘receive’ the articulation.
29. Articulation cannot be automatic – there must be an agreement between affected parties, preferably with all parties subscribing to shared principles in which the interests of learners carry as much weight as the interests of the parties. The agreements should be documented and the subject of regular review as information regarding the quality of the qualifications involved becomes available. The documentation should, at a minimum, include:
- NQF details¹ of the qualification being articulated to
 - NQF details of the qualification being articulated from
 - any advanced placement provisions that are applicable
 - any additional conditions (such as grade levels, additional assessment, etc) that may be required to be met
 - any constraints on the number of learners that can be accommodated through such arrangements
 - processes that must be followed if there is any change to the qualifications and/or associated pathways involved
 - processes for the review of the agreement.
30. In recent developments for qualification documents, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority has requested additional information to be stated in the outcome statements for each qualification. In addition to statements of outcomes relevant to the abilities-profile of the graduate² (as required in Namibia NQF qualifications) there must now also be statements of:

¹ID number, Title and Level, and awarding body when not National or Namibian.

²This should be a statement of the ‘sum of the parts’ ability and not a listing of each outcome (as the latter is already provided in the qualification document) – that is, the statement should state in a holistic way what the qualification holder can be expected to do rather than list the relevant, separate outcomes that make up the qualification.

- the *Education Pathways* – what other qualifications the graduate could enrol in after completing the qualification in question. If the qualification is a stand-alone qualification, this must be made clear.
- the *Employment Pathways* or contributions to the community that holding the qualification would enable³.

31. Though intended to protect students and stakeholders from low-quality provision in higher education and from disreputable and rogue provider institutions, the UNESCO-OECD (non-binding) *Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education* (2005) could provide some guidance for enhanced articulation opportunities within Namibia. Amongst other things, the Guidelines include recommendations focussing on:

- the need for enhanced provision of adequate information resources to enable informed decision-making
- making qualification documents more readable and transparent
- making procedures for the recognition of qualifications more transparent, coherent, fair and reliable
- reducing burdens on mobile students and professionals
- intensifying co-operation between interested parties to increase mutual understanding.

32. Though the Guidelines are specific to cross-border provision of education and training, the guidelines could be readily adopted to reflect cross-provider provision within the national, NQF system. Suggested actions could, for example, include:

- statements of commitments to quality assurance provisions as espoused through the NQF system and structures, and the related registration and accreditation systems – especially in terms of assessment and reporting
- enhanced accessibility to information of assessment standards and procedures
- strengthened collaboration between provider institutions, and between institutions and organisations with the regulatory bodies
- enhanced mutual recognition agreements based on expressions of trust and understanding of each parties procedures and quality assurance practices
- greater adoption of cross-provider review panels and joint projects for enhanced benchmarking of standards, assessment practices and criteria, etc
- strengthened contacts and engagements with all relevant stakeholders in the development of qualifications and programme delivery methodologies
- greater involvement of student bodies as active partners in the development of articulation and transfer agreements.

³These two information requirements are stated in a number of NQF qualification documents in Namibia, generally in the Purpose Statement. In order to enhance the transparency of this information it may be useful to follow the NZQA practice.

Summary

33. Article 20 of the Constitution of the Republic of Namibia states that all persons shall have a right to education. This does not, however, guarantee admission to any institution and/or programme.
34. Despite the principles of the NQF advocating for progression, articulation and transfer, the possession of a qualification does not guarantee or automate progression and/or admission for any student. Space is limited within institutions.
35. The Accreditation Regulations give institutions and organisations rights to determine their own admission requirements for programmes. The requirements must reflect the optimisation of potential to succeed. They cannot be discriminatory.
36. In many countries (eg RSA) admission requirements or the rights to control admission is sometimes specified in legislation. This may be something to be investigated in Namibia. Alternatively, the NQF Regulations could be amended to require that qualification descriptors be inclusive of admission or progression details ion greater depth.
37. It is commonly accepted that an admitting institution or organisation must be fully satisfied that any applicant to a programme or qualification has the requisite competence in the appropriate field of study at the relevant entry level. Competence cannot and is not always signalled through the holding of a qualification. Is it fair for institutions and organisations to *demand* that any applicant has met all the credit requirements of an exit-level, qualifying qualification before they can progress into another qualification? What of the notion of the *potential* to engage in studies? Historical limitations to access to education and training have often precluded people having proof of the requisite competence. This adds to the importance of nationally agreed and supported RPL and REL processes. It is through these processes that an admitting institution or organisation can be assured of necessary competence and more assured that their awarding standards are maintained.
38. It is an internationally- accepted requirement of any admitting institution or organisation that they fully, transparently and accessibly stipulate admission requirements. This should also be inclusive of quantitative limits applicable to any programme at any level.

Proposals

39. It is recommended that Articulation and Credit Transfer within the NQF environment in Namibia be led by the following definitions, principles and guideline procedures.

Definitions

- a. *Articulation* means the agreed or accepted linking of two or more qualifications together to create an integrated qualifications structure in which one qualification leads to another.
- b. *Credit Transfer* means the recognition of attainment (on a negotiated, case-by-case basis where non-national qualifications are involved) in a component of a NQF qualification towards the attainment of a comparable component of another (NQF) qualification.
- c. Both (a) and (b) can be internally administered within a provider and/or administered between providers.

Principles

In Namibia, articulation and credit transfer will be guided by the following overarching and operational principles:

- d. Learners holding a NQF qualification or registered component of a NQF qualification shall have an expectation that their attainment will be optimally recognised by a provider operating in Namibia in terms of entry and learning progression.
- e. The NQF and the related quality assurance systems (especially Accreditation) shall provide the basis for any articulation and transfer of attainments.
- f. All providers operating in Namibia shall set and follow readily accessible, clear and coherent, documented arrangements that enable articulation and credit transfer for the benefit of learners in their pursuit of effective learning pathways where such arrangements:
 - i. cover internal and external situations applicable to the provider
 - ii. are fair and recognise and facilitate attainments in appropriate ways
 - iii. are characterised by transparency, are open to scrutiny and enable defensible justification for any situations where optimal benefits are not given to learners
 - iv. are timely in terms of access to programmes and learning/attainment progression
 - v. do not compromise quality or standards of and in the award of any qualification
 - vi. give acknowledgement and due recognition to any distinctive features of any qualification
 - vii. do not differentiate between the different ways in which learning and attainment can take place
 - viii. allow for review and appeal of any outcomes
 - ix. provide recognition for partial and/or whole attainments at the highest level possible for the demonstrated achievements of the learner.

Operational Procedures

- g. Documentation of qualifications registered on the NQF of Namibia shall, as a section of the Purpose Statement, state:
- i. the overarching ability reasonably expected of a holder of the qualification
 - ii. relevant education pathways in terms of other qualifications a graduate could expect to enrol in
 - iii. relevant employment pathways or contributions to the community enabled by the holding of the qualification.
- h. Providers shall actively enter into and retain documented agreements for articulation of qualifications, where these are relevant, with other providers and be inclusive of relevant student-representative bodies, where such agreements clearly identify:
- NQF details of the qualification being articulated to
 - NQF details of the qualification being articulated from
 - any advanced placement provisions that are applicable
 - any additional conditions (such as grade levels, additional assessment, etc) that may be required to be met
 - any constraints on the number of learners that can be accommodated through such arrangements
 - processes that must be followed if there is any change to the qualifications and/or associated pathways involved
 - processes for the review of the agreement.
- i. Providers must, in the case of their own qualifications registered on the NQF, make available transcripts of learning attainment that optimise potential for transfer and progression in that:
- the learner is fully identified
 - the issuing provider or organisation is fully identified
 - the person authorised to issue the transcript is fully identified
 - the NQF identifier for the relevant qualification, the exit Level, and any NQF Classification category is identified
 - the NQF identifier for any component (where relevant) OR the NQF Level and Credit value for any completed, non-registered component of a full qualification (ie, as listed in the registration document of the relevant qualification) is identified
 - achievement of the learner (credits awarded, grade and/or mark) is recorded.

Transcripts showing non-NQF registered components shall be supplemented with descriptive information on the nature, level, content and, if appropriate, context of the studies pursued and assessed.

- j. Industry Skills Committees of the Namibia Training Authority shall optimise the development of sectorally-generic unit standards and/or the use of credits of unit standards applicable to other unit-standards based qualifications or Job Profiles set by other ISCs

References

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- Comments made by participants in a Breakaway Session on the Benefits and Challenges of Articulation at the NQF of Namibia Review Conference held at Swakopmund in November 2013 (and from others attending the Conference) have been given acknowledgement in this paper.