

**A POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR
RESEARCH IN GENERAL AND
FURTHER EDUCATION AND
TRAINING**

Umalusi Policy 2011

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1. Introduction

Umalusi needs educationally sound, relevant and appropriate approaches to setting standards and quality assurance informed by research, to formulate meaningful policies and to inform its strategic direction. In order to fulfill this requirement, Umalusi, empowered by legislation, conducts or commissions and publishes research on issues relevant to the development and implementation of the General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Framework, one of three sub-frameworks that comprise the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). This policy serves as a format for determining the intent and scope of Umalusi's research, using standards and criteria for establishing research priorities, identifying new research initiatives and improving the management of research. The policy is instrumental in promoting and maintaining the highest standards of integrity and quality in the research conducted by Umalusi.

By applying this framework, Umalusi intends to improve the focus and quality of its research, achieve efficiency in research management and use and ensure that research findings are widely disseminated. The framework is also intended to provide operational guidance which establishes procedures for identifying priority research projects. This framework document also guides the development of Umalusi's Research Agenda.

2. Legislative and strategic mandate

The promulgation of the *NQF Act*, (Act 67 of 2008) constituted Umalusi as the Quality Council for General and Further Education and Training, as provided for in the amended GENFETQA Act of 2008. Umalusi serves as one of three Quality Councils alongside the Council for Higher Education (CHE) and the Quality

Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO). It is required to collaborate with the South African Qualifications Authority and the other Quality Councils (QCs), subject to the requirements of the *NQF Act*, its founding Act, and the *National Education Policy Act* (Act No 27 of 1996).

In addition to the responsibilities outlined in its founding Act, and which are set out in subsequent paragraphs, Umalusi must conduct, commission and publish research on issues relevant to the development and implementation of the sub-framework for general and further education and training and must inform the public of the qualifications on its sub-framework. In terms of Paragraph 27 of the NQF Act, Umalusi as a QC must, in respect of its sub-framework:

- a. Develop and manage its sub-framework;
- b. Advise and make recommendations related to the sub-framework to the relevant Minister;
- c. Consider and agree to level descriptors, and ensure that they remain current and appropriate;
- d. Propose policy for the development, registration, and publication of qualifications for its sub-framework in accordance with requirements outlined in the NQF Act, as well as;
- e. Ensure the development of such qualifications—and part-qualifications—as are necessary for the sector, including indication of appropriate measures for the delivery and assessment of learning achievement, and recommend them to SAQA for registration;
- f. Propose policy for quality assurance within the sub-framework;
- g. Ensure the autonomy, integrity, and credibility of quality assurance for qualifications registered on its sub-framework;
- h. Maintain a database of learner achievement and related matters;
- i. Provide information regarding the sub-framework to the public; and
- j. Perform any other functions required by the NQF Act, or functions consistent with this Act which the relevant Minister may determine.

In terms of *The General and Further Education and Training Quality Assurance Act, Act 58 of 2001*, as amended, Umalusi is also required—in terms of its quality assurance of assessment responsibilities—to:

- a. ensure the necessary quality assurance work is undertaken by the QC itself or by a body to which such powers have been delegated, and that the outcomes of such work are reported;
- b. develop policy for assessment, including internal assessment where such contributes to the final marks, and standardization;
- c. ensure and verify the implementation of such policy by the assessment bodies responsible;
- d. report irregularities which may jeopardize the integrity of an assessment or its outcome to the relevant Director-General; and
- e. issue certificates to learners who have achieved qualifications or part-qualifications.

Also in terms of its founding act, as amended, Umalusi—with respect to private provision—is required to undertake the following accreditation responsibilities:

- a. develop policy, which must be regulated by the Minister, for the accreditation of assessment bodies, other than departments of education, and accredit assessment bodies accordingly;
- b. develop policy and criteria for the quality assurance of private education institutions, including independent schools, private colleges and private Adult Basic Education and Training centres;
- c. ensure that any institution required to register as a private school, college, or ABET centre complies with the quality assurance policy and criteria determined by Umalusi; and affirm or withdraw the accreditation status of the private institution concerned.

All these responsibilities and processes are informed by research and are located in different functional units of Umalusi. The research is conceptually initiated internally or through advice received from an established Research Forum. This process leads to the development of a research proposal which is discussed, planned for and approved by Umalusi's executive.

3. Definition of research

The literature is replete with definitions of what research is. For the purposes of this document, the definition offered by Leedy and Ormrod (2005: 4¹) is adopted, and they define research as "the systematic process of collecting and analyzing information (data) in order to increase our understanding of the phenomenon about which we are concerned or interested". Umalusi defines research as rigorous systematic investigation of a well-defined problem. The difficulty lies in the fact that "what constitutes a research-worthy problem is not readily apparent..." as observed by Ellis and Levy (2008: 17)². This would imply that the methodology, results, and conclusions of a study are directly impacted by the problem driving the research.

The research process incorporates a well-defined hypothesis, a defined methodology for the gathering of information, analysis of data, and through the interpretation of the data, to formulate conclusions. The research is conducted in a number of different ways because these serve different purposes. These

¹ Leedy, P. D. and Ormrod, J.E. 2005. *Practical research: planning and design*. Upper Saddle: River, New Jersey: Prantice Hall.

² Ellis, T.M. and Levy, Y. 2008. Framework of problem-based research: A guide for novice researchers on the development of a research-worthy problem. *Informing Science: the International Journal of an Emerging Transdiscipline*, 11: 17 -33.

range from literature reviews, content analysis, evaluative to qualitative and quantitative research. This definition excludes reports on routine processes such as development of qualifications, moderation of examination products, monitoring of accredited providers etc. The instruments used for such routine processes are required to be reviewed, where necessary, through the Statistical Information and Research (SIR) Unit to ensure the validity of the data collected for reporting purposes

Umalusi promotes and maintains a culture that welcomes rigorous investigation, engages professionally with research communities to improve its own research base, supports mutually productive research partnerships with local and international research bodies, and enhances its own capacity to manage, interpret, disseminate and apply the findings of research.

4. Objectives of the framework

The main objectives of the framework are to:

- o Put in place simple, coherent structures and processes within Umalusi to deal efficiently with research matters;
- o Ensure research underpins Umalusi's approaches, policymaking, strategies and interventions;
- o Improve the quality of research conducted within Umalusi;
- o Improve Umalusi's capacity to monitor and evaluate research conducted by its units;
- o Ensure better coordination, alignment, and dissemination of research among the operational units of Umalusi.

5. Purpose

The purpose of this framework is to ensure that:

- research conducted is rigorous and is aligned with Umalusi's strategic goals and vision,
- research underpins the theoretical basis for all Umalusi's professional work, and provides new direction when needed,
- research conducted by Umalusi is of high quality
- the co-ordination, alignment and dissemination of research amongst the units of Umalusi is properly managed
- research foregrounds the nature and the quality of the work Umalusi undertakes in quality assurance for a wider audience, including academic audiences,
- research forms one of the pillars of Umalusi's credibility in the national education and training environment,
- Stakeholders are engaged with, through conferences and published documents.

6. Key principles

In conducting its research, Umalusi is guided by the following principles:

- **Quality:** Umalusi undertakes and supports high quality research that not only meets the standards for research implementation but also assures review of the research at critical stages, from proposal to outcome.
- **Research Standards and Ethics:** In order to ensure that Umalusi's research meets the highest ethical standards, Umalusi has developed a Research Ethics policy. The policy guides all Umalusi research to ensure the highest levels of accountability. It also aims to promote awareness of ethical

principles and issues in the conduct of research activities, thereby clarifying for researchers and staff their ethical obligations.

- **Integration:** It is the policy of Umalusi that research be fully incorporated and integrated into operations of Umalusi as appropriate.

7. Criteria for establishing research priorities

Umalusi's Research Agenda identifies priority problems that require research. The agenda is informed internally by the operational units of Umalusi and externally by Council and all its committees. At the end of each calendar year, Council and its committees' members are requested to suggest possible areas of new research. Assistant managers and managers in various units of Umalusi are also expected to suggest areas of research related to their work. All the suggestions are considered when updating the research agenda.

The following criteria are used in selecting topics for the research agenda:

- **Relevance:** Relevance to Umalusi's strategic goals and reflection of its strategic priorities within its mandate
- **Importance:** Magnitude or severity of the problem is substantial and opportunities for impact and involvement are great.
- **Consistency:** Consistency with ongoing quality assurances processes so that the research contributes to and builds upon current processes.
- **Feasibility:** There is a reasonable likelihood that the research will produce new and useful knowledge or understanding within a specified time.

These are the factors to be considered not only in initiating research but in continuing with research and terminating projects should this be deemed appropriate.

8. Research management

The Statistical Information and Research (SIR) unit is responsible for the conduct, management and the co-ordination of new research. If the research is undertaken by another unit, the SIR unit must oversee the conceptualisation of the project with the assistance of the Research Advisory Committee (RAC) and the Research Forum (RF). The SIR unit is the secretariat of both the RF and RAC.

8.1 Research advisory committee

The Research Advisory Committee (RAC) is an internal structure, consisting of Senior Managers of SIR, QCC units and Senior Researchers, which advises OCEO. Its responsibilities are to:

- scrutinize all the research proposals against agreed upon research standards before they are discussed at the RF,
- scrutinize all the contracts and Terms of Reference (ToR) for commissioned research projects, and
- examine the quality of research instruments and reports, and advise accordingly.

8.2 Research Forum

The purpose of the Research Forum is to guide the research work of Umalusi. The forum, established by the Council of Umalusi although not a committee of Council, consists of experts in educational research with various research interests in general and further education and training. The forum has the following functions:

- Evaluate and provide input into the research projects to be conducted,
- Review progress on research projects,

- Identify research priorities to be undertaken by Umalusi,
- Provide a platform for networking with other research organizations,
- Promote the dissemination of research results through Umalusi's publications and other media.

9. Research processes

Research projects are conceptualized internally – usually to solve a problem or provide clarity on identified challenges. The problem or challenge might be identified by Umalusi's executive management, Council or any of its committees.

To ensure that the research is rigorous, the following processes are followed for all projects before any 'new' research is undertaken:

- A proposal is developed, with clear research questions, methodology and instrument (where required)
- The proposal is submitted to the Research Advisory Committee
- The Research Advisory Committee provides feedback on the proposal and submits it to the Research Forum when it is satisfied with the quality and feasibility of the proposed project
- The proposal and instrument(s) are discussed at the Research Forum meeting
- The Research Forum's inputs is sought and considered. This means that on occasion proposals are revised. Research is undertaken once the OCEO has approved the project
- The research is conducted based on clear Terms of Reference. Researcher or a team of researchers are appointed who could be Umalusi's staff, independent contractors or university academics depending on the expertise required and the needs of the research project. All researchers are appointed using standard contracts.

- Once the research is completed a report is compiled
- A critical reader or reference group is identified and contracted to comment on the research report
- The report is updated on the basis of the critical reader's feedback
- The report is returned to the critical reader for final checking
- The report is edited and proof read
- A final report (or critical reader's report) is presented at the next meeting of the Research Forum when possible
- The report is sent to Umalusi's executive for approval to publish
- The findings of the research are discussed with affected stakeholders
- The report is printed and launched.

10. Quality of research and process of review/evaluation

Research progress and results are monitored and evaluated for quality, impact, participation, and coordination. The instruments used in the research are regularly reviewed for validity.

11. Research ownership

Umalusi conducts, commissions and publishes research on issues of importance to the development and implementation of the sub-framework of qualifications in General and Further Education and Training. Thus, Umalusi encourages all its employees to conduct research and one of the ways in which this is done is by protecting the rights and privileges which employees enjoy in the pursuit of knowledge.

Umalusi *owns the intellectual property (IP)* by contractual agreement with the researchers/consultants commissioned to undertake the research. The IP can be

made available, at the discretion of Umalusi, under conditions which will most effectively promote its development and use for the promotion of the quality of education and training in South Africa.

12. Research information and dissemination

All the research reports are approved for publication by OCEO before they are published and disseminated. Upon approval, the research findings are discussed with the relevant/affected stakeholders before they are widely disseminated through seminars and conferences. These stakeholders might be assessment bodies both public and private, the Departments of Education, other QCs, Professional Bodies, providers of education and training, to name a few.

Umalusi also jointly hosts seminars with other organizations to address issues of common interest in relation to the enhancement of the quality of teaching and learning and assessment in the sectors for which Umalusi is responsible. The purpose of these seminars is to promote debates and profile Umalusi positions so as to influence policy developments/reviews and practice. Umalusi encourages and supports the publication of all research findings in the form of publications or reports in international, national and local recognized/peer-reviewed journals, books, chapters of books, and annual reports.

13. Research funding

Research projects are funded through the budget of the Statistical Information Research unit. Research projects undertaken by other units of Umalusi are funded by the respective units.

Umalusi may participate or collaborate in research funded by other organisations provided that it is in line with Umalusi strategic goals and mandate.

14. Capacity building

Experience has shown that knowledge developed through research is not necessarily transferable. Development of research capacity within the different units of Umalusi is a key contributor to sustainability; it enables those who are affected to find relevant solutions to problems through research. Such participation increases the likelihood that results will be applied at a technical level. Two workshops are held annually in order to build the capacity of staff members to interpret and apply research findings relevant to their areas of responsibility.