

Building trust for better movement across SADC: August 2018 update on the SADC Qualifications Framework (SADCQF)

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31 August 2018

1. Introduction and Background

The intention of this article is to inform the South African public about the latest developments in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region to implement its Qualifications Framework (QF), the SADCQF. Click on the link to download a copy of the SADCQF booklet: <http://www.saqa.org.za/docs/webcontent/2017/SADCQF%20booklet.pdf>.

The SADCQF, a comprehensive Regional Qualifications Framework (RQF) for schooling, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and higher education, was established in 2011 by the SADC Ministers of Education. Its purpose is to enable easier movement of learners and workers across the SADC region and internationally. It is a 10-level RQF underpinned by learning outcomes and quality assurance (QA) principles that will provide a regional reference for qualifications and QA mechanisms in SADC. The SADCQF booklet contains the SADC level descriptors (pages 10-11) and QA guidelines (pages 13-14). The links below provide access to infographics on the SADCQF level descriptors <http://www.saqa.org.za/docs/webcontent/2017/SADCQF%20Level%20descriptors.pdf> and the QA guidelines <http://www.saqa.org.za/docs/webcontent/2017/SADCQF%20QA%20Guidelines%20Poster.pdf>.

Member States agreed to align their qualifications and QA mechanisms to the SADCQF. The vision is that, in the SADC region, all new qualification certificates, diplomas and other qualification credentials issued by competent authorities will contain the relevant level on the SADCQF. Alignment will enable this recognition of achievement at a regional level. The resulting transparency and information about the qualifications and QA of aligned Member States will further assist in embedding mutual trust amongst SADC Members. Regional alignment would also enable institutions and individuals to make comparisons of their learning and competence levels and would reduce unnecessary duplication of learning and effort when moving through SADC for study or work purposes.

To give effect to this decision by the Ministers, a Technical Committee on Certification and Accreditation (TCCA) was given the task of implementing the SADCQF. The TCCA is a group of experts from the 16 SADC Member States and is supported by the SADC Secretariat. At a September 2016 meeting of the TCCA, the implementation process of the SADCQF was revived and an implementation model developed. A clear two-year milestone plan was agreed, and an implementation model initially comprising three programmes namely (1) development and alignment; (2) quality assurance and (3) verification was adopted <http://www.saqa.org.za/docs/webcontent/2017/SADCQF%20Implementation%20Model.pdf>.

Later three more programmes relevant to regional development were added namely (4) Communication and advocacy and (5) Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT) and articulation, and (6) Governance. The link <http://www.saqa.org.za/docs/webcontent/2017/SADC%20RPL%20Guidelines.pdf> will provide access to a copy of the SADC RPL guidelines.

Eight countries volunteered to pilot the alignment of their qualifications frameworks or education and training systems to that of the SADCQF. In order to provide support and centrally drive co-ordination of implementation, a TCCA Executive Committee (EXCO) was established based on the SADC Troika principles. To ensure the sustainability of the implementation of the SADCQF, a proposal for a SADCQF implementation unit has been submitted to the SADC Secretariat and is currently being considered but, in the meantime, Member States volunteer to support the SADC Secretariat with the implementation effort.

Since the September 2016 meeting considerable progress has been made as described next.

2. Development and alignment of National Qualifications Frameworks/ Systems

The main purpose of the SADCQF is to promote mobility, and as such, it plays a key role in being the regional reference point for comparing qualifications obtained in SADC. Currently the SADCQF is a reference framework only with the prospect of later developing into a framework that has qualifications registered onto it. Eight SADC countries are piloting alignment of their National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) or National Qualifications Systems (NQS) with the SADCQF. The pilot countries are Botswana, Lesotho, Mauritius, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Swaziland and Zambia. An alignment plan and roadmap, as well as alignment timelines were developed to assist the eight pilot countries. Support was provided via alignment capacity building workshops hosted by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA).

Essential to the alignment process is the establishment of a National Alignment Committee (NAC) to spearhead and approve the process. In South Africa, the NAC comprises the following six national bodies: Council on Higher Education (CHE); Department of Basic Education (DBE); Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET); Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO); SAQA and Umalusi. The NAC is a committee established by the CEO Committee of the NQF.

The future plans of the TCCA are to assist pilot countries to complete their alignment reports and eventually roll out alignment to the other eight SADC countries. Looking ahead, there is also a plan to develop an inventory of the NQFs and NQS in SADC. South Africa is overseeing this programme to ensure that it is centrally driven and supported. Currently South Africa is also providing secretarial support to the SADC Secretariat.

3. Quality assurance

The SADCQF encourages SADC countries to have good quality assurance (QA) mechanisms in place and links up with key regional QA bodies. In this regard the Southern African Quality Assurance Network (SAQAN) has nominated two QA experts to assist the TCCA with the implementation of QA in SADC. The Southern Africa Association for Educational Assessment (SAAEA) has also been approached to provide experts that will assist the TCCA with implementation of the SADCQF with specific focus on the general education sector.

The future plans are to strengthen SADC countries' QA mechanisms in terms of accreditation and certification and support their alignment with the SADC QA guidelines. Already progress has been made with creating a list of credible SADC institutions and their qualifications and making the information publicly available. Looking ahead, it is important to strengthen QA capacity in SADC. To this end, opportunities for QA capacity building is consistently being sought, in particular opportunities to engage with the Addis Convention (*Revised Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas, Degrees and Other Academic Qualifications in Higher Education in African States*). Botswana is overseeing this programme to ensure that QA alignment and implementation is centrally driven and supported.

4. Verification

While the preceding programmes promote trust by ensuring that qualifications and quality assurance meet the regional standards, it is important that countries have mechanisms that can verify information about individual qualifications obtained in Member States. To ensure that credible, trustworthy information is shared across SADC, a regional Qualifications Verification Network (SADCQVN) was established. The SADCQVN was initiated to strengthen verification in SADC and is a member of the African Qualifications

Verification Network (AQVN), which shares the common goal of ensuring that African qualifications can be trusted. A SADCQVN booklet was produced which provides information on the right people to contact when verifying qualifications in SADC: <http://www.saga.org.za/docs/webcontent/2017/SADCQVN%20Brochure.pdf>. The SADCQVN booklet is consistently updated and shared across the region. The annual collation of statistical information on learner and worker mobility in SADC, as well as on misrepresented qualifications, is a key feature of the work of the SADCQVN.

The future plans are to develop a SADC recognition manual, develop regional policies on verification and set up verification agreements between SADC countries. To ensure that the SADCQVN employs modern and innovative technologies, there are plans to pilot real-time verification at a regional level. There are also plans to assist Member States to develop their qualifications infrastructure so that information on their qualifications can be provided quickly and efficiently. Swaziland is overseeing this programme to ensure that it is centrally driven and supported.

5. Communication and advocacy

The TCCA has identified platforms to advocate for - and communicate about - the SADCQF. Already information about the SADCQF has been distributed at national, regional and international levels. A communication strategy, which includes promotional material on the SADCQF, was developed and approved. Social media sites (Twitter: <https://twitter.com/sadcqf> and Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/SadcQualificationsFramework/>) were set up and used to disseminate information about the SADCQF. The SADCQF has never been formally launched despite being approved in 2011. To ensure that the SADCQF is visible and that Member States commit to its implementation, a formal launch by the SADC Ministers of Education, and popularisation of the SADCQF by the TCCA, took place in the first half of 2017.

6. RPL, CAT and articulation

The SADC region has a set of RPL guidelines that were approved by SADC Ministers in June 2016. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has been closely involved in the production of the SADC RPL guidelines and has further indicated a readiness to assist with implementation across the region. SAQAN has been closely involved in the production of the draft regional CAT guidelines and is available to provide support to SADC. This programme will also focus on articulation namely pathways and progression opportunities within and between schooling, TVET and higher education.

This programme is centrally driven and supported by Namibia.

7. Governance

The TCCA, with assistance from the SADC Secretariat was tasked with implementing the SADCQF. However, implementation of the SADCQF has been slow, despite being approved by SADC Ministers in 2011 already. Implementation has been constrained by a lack of human capacity as well as financial resources at both national and regional level to undertake the SADCQF-related activities. The TCCA, chaired by one of the Member countries, started driving the process and assisting the SADC Secretariat to be the key driving force. As part of the driving force, a TCCA EXCO was established to speed up implementation.

Since September 2016 the TCCA and its EXCO has accelerated implementation of the SADCQF. The following has already been achieved:

- Developing an action plan to start implementation of the SADCQF;
- Setting up and ensuring regular meetings to co-ordinate the work of the TCCA and capacity building;

- Developing an implementation road map and implementation model which includes the six programmes of the SADCQF;
- Mobilising Member States to take on the responsibility to drive the six programmes of SADCQF implementation;
- Mobilising Member States to provide secretarial support to the SADC Secretariat;
- Setting up the Electronic Certificate pilot project;
- Developing and facilitating capacity building workshops for alignment for eight pilot countries; and
- Developing and implementing an advocacy strategy.

A fully operational SADCQF will provide the region with the following benefits:

- Improved mobility of skilled labour in the region;
- Easier comparability and recognition, including the verification of qualifications in the region;
- Improved articulation of qualifications within the education systems in the region;
- Improved quality assurance systems in the region;
- Improved awareness of how qualifications compare in the region; and
- Reduction of misrepresented and fraudulent qualifications being used in the region.

It is against this background that the TCCA has proposed that a SADCQF implementation unit be established to ensure the sustainable functioning of the SADCQF at regional level.

7. Consolidation

Implementation of the SADCQF entails implementing the following programmes: 1) Governance; 2) Development and alignment; 3) Verification of qualifications; 4) Quality Assurance; 5) RPL, articulation and CAT and 6) Advocacy and Communication.

The TCCA understands that in order to maintain the momentum created since September 2016 there is a need to consolidate, review and plan the work going forward. The TCCA meets regularly to keep members updated with SADCQF matters, including discussing the following:

- Harmonising energies to synergise QA initiatives across Africa and strengthening countries' capacity to ratify the Addis Convention;
- Meeting with the SADCQVN to plan and monitor its various verification initiatives;
- Reviewing overall progress to fast-track SADCQF implementation, with a focus on improving the overall structures that need to be put in place to foster optimal functioning of the SADCQF and make recommendations to Ministers; and
- Considering funding models for setting up a sustainable regional implementation unit that will assist with implementing the SADCQF and strengthening countries by employing more resources at the country level.

8. Conclusion

This article has outlined the latest information and major developments in the implementation of the SADCQF. Progress has been made in SADCQF communication, aligning NQFs to the SADCQF, ensuring that qualifications meet regional QA standards, establishing a mechanism for verifying SADC qualifications and furthering RPL, CAT and articulation. To ensure the sustainability of the SADCQF and strengthen SADC countries, various funding models are being considered.

All of these measures have the common purpose of building trust in SADC qualifications and enhancing better movement of learners and workers across the SADC region. It is envisaged that a fully operational SADCQF will promote lifelong learning by enabling easier movement of learners and workers regionally, continentally and internationally.