

The Role of Professional Associations in the South African Education and Training System

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ABSTRACT The National Qualifications Framework Act (NQF Act 67) changed the landscape of professional bodies in the South African (SA) education and training system substantially by mandating the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) to recognise professional bodies and to register their designations on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). This study endeavoured to critically look at the roles and responsibilities of professional bodies as dictated by SAQA, against existing literature on the role of professional bodies, to determine what should be the role of professional bodies in the new SA education and training system. The research approach was quantitative and non-probability sampling, consisting of convenience and judgemental sampling techniques used to collect data using online questionnaires. The findings reveal that the impact of the implementation of the NQF Act had been very positive, and professions and professional bodies enjoy increased status and recognition, and that there is also a minimum standard for professions and professionals. Further, professional bodies will continue to play the traditional role in the new NQF landscape. Many professional bodies now have a formal constitution and their focus on life-long learning through continuous professional development (CPD) has increased, as has the award of professional designations.

INTRODUCTION

The South African (SA) National Qualifications Framework (NQF), which was established through promulgation of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Act in 1995, was conceptualised as an all-encompassing education and training system, where all sectors and levels of education and training are included (Blom 2006: 27). The objectives of the NQF are to create an integrated national framework for learning achievements and to enhance access to, and mobility and quality within, education and training (SAQA Act 1995). The SAQA Act of 1995 did not stipulate a specific role for professional bodies in the education and training system, and there was no legislation regulating the role of professional bodies, except individual Acts governing specific statutory professional bodies (Council on Higher Education (CHE) 2002: 41).

The quality assurance model of the NQF required the establishment of a number of Education and Training Quality Assurance bodies (ETQAs) responsible for the 'monitoring and auditing [of] achievements in terms of national standards or qualifications' (Keevy 2005: 10). A number of professional bodies chose to apply

for ETQA status under the SAQA Act No. 58, of 1995 and, ETQA Regulations No. 1127, of 8 September 1998 and these bodies had, for the purposes of obtaining and retaining ETQA status, to comply with the ETQA Regulations (CHE 2000: 41). However, by 1999, two years after SAQA's establishment and four years after the SAQA Act (SAQA 1995) had been passed, South Africa started to engage 'in a somewhat premature review process that would persist, without significant closure, well into the next decade' (Keevy 2005: 17). In essence, the NQF review was aimed at 'streamlining and accelerating' the NQF and its implementation. Following the NQF review, the NQF Act 67 of 2008 replaced the SAQA Act 58 of 1995, and brought about significant changes to the South African education and training landscape, inter-alia, it mandated the SAQA to recognise professional bodies and to register their designations on the NQF.

In order to fulfil its function to recognize professional bodies and register their professional designations on the NQF, SAQA developed the *Policy and Criteria for Recognising a Professional Body and Registering a Professional Designation for the Purposes of the National Qualifications Framework Act, Act 67 of 2008* (hereafter referred to as the Policy and Criteria

for Professional Bodies). The aforementioned document outlines the manner in which SAQA intends to recognise statutory and non-statutory professional bodies for the purposes of its mandate under the NQF Act 67 of 2008 (hereafter called the NQF Act), as well as the manner in which professional designations from recognised professional bodies are registered on the NQF. As of 31 July 2013, SAQA had formally recognised a total of 55 professional bodies (SAQA 2013). The formal recognition of professional bodies in terms of the NQF Act and the 'Policy and Criteria' document resulted in a debate about the role of professional bodies in the SA education and training system.

In light of the above, this study was undertaken to address the objectives described below.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this paper are to report on the role that professional bodies could (and should) play in the SA education and training system, and also to compare the role and responsibilities of these bodies as proposed by SAQA (in the Policy and Criteria document), to that proposed in the literature and embedded in the practice of most of these bodies. The paper also briefly considers the role that professional bodies traditionally play worldwide and, compare this to the requirements of professional bodies in South Africa, as instituted by SAQA through the Policy and Criteria for Professional Bodies.

Literature Review

Louw (1990: 5) identified three approaches to study the professions, namely the trait, functionalist and critical studies approach. The trait approach which, classifies the characteristics of professions in a structured manner, suggests identifying the 'traits' of a profession, thereby making it possible to distinguish between professional and non-professional occupations. However, the traits approach is not without criticism. Eraut (1994: 1) argues that 'lists of 'traits' do not help to resolve the problem of definition because inter-alia, lists are inclined to be based on the author's view of what constitutes the most salient features for high-status professions, there was no general agreement on which traits

were regarded most important, and also that traits could be 'culturally specific' and thus not generally applicable across different countries. Nevertheless, Louw (1990: 8) maintains that despite the criticisms against the trait approach, 'it is difficult to escape thinking in terms of characteristics in some way or the other if one wants to define a profession'.

The functionalist approach assumes that professions fulfil certain fundamental needs in society, and implies that the more fundamental the need, the higher the value that society places on the services rendered by that particular profession (Louw 1990: 8). One example of this would be the medical profession, which approach implies social unity by making use of professional expertise and knowledge. More recently, critical studies focus on the economic and political dimensions of professions, and work done by researchers in this area reflects the political influence of the professions, its relation to the political and economic elite and government, and its relation to the market and class system (Louw 1990: 10).

SAQA, although not offering a definition of the concept 'profession' does seem to have aligned itself with the traits approach, as is evident from the list of criteria that it requires to be met by organizations and institutions which apply for professional recognition status (SAQA 2012: 6). Taking SAQA's list of criteria into account, the traits approach seemed to give the most structured and quantifiable theoretical framework for understanding the professions. Thus, in the present paper, the researchers decided to use the trait or attribute approach as a framework for understanding professions and professional bodies.

While there is considerable agreement on the elements that make up a profession, neither of these definitions are all-encompassing, and the best definition would be one that combines the knowledge, skills and requirements for research, education and training, with the status and remuneration aspects, and include the aspects of commitment to public service and high ethical standards. Having reviewed the views of several researchers, inter-alia, the Australian Council of Professions (2013), it became evident that in general, five common traits or themes emerge in the definition of a profession, namely, specialized knowledge, ethics and public service, status prestige and power, autonomy and judge-

ment, and formal professional association. By drawing on the themes which emerged from a review of the literature, the researchers developed a working definition for the purposes of this study, namely, *A profession is a group of professionals, organised through a system of self-regulation, with special knowledge and skills built on specific research, education and training, that adheres to a set of ethical standards and that enjoys a particular social status or authority based on this status, allowing them to exercise professional judgement.*

Having defined a profession, we now consider the professional body which according to SAQA (2006), is a body appointed to represent a recognised 'community of expert practitioners' and as such it devises, informs, monitors and continually updates the benchmark standards of competence, both academic practical and ethical, required in the practice of the profession for which it is responsible. SAQA also requires that professional bodies be 'a legally constituted entity with the necessary human and financial resources to undertake its functions, governed either by a statute, charter or a constitution and compliant with and adheres to good corporate governance practices' and 'prohibit unfair exclusionary practices.' SAQA (2012: 6) outlines the following functions for professional bodies: protecting the public interest, developing, awarding, monitoring and revoking its professional designations, submission of a list of members to SAQA, setting criteria for, promoting and monitoring continuing professional development (CPD), and publishing and enforcing a code of conduct for its profession.

While SAQA's definition refers to the expertise element, stating that a professional body is 'a body constituted to represent and/or regulate a recognised community of expert practitioners', this role is not explicitly prescribed in the functions that SAQA would require professional bodies to perform. As previously stated, it is not listed as one of the criteria for recognition of a professional body, and as such, professional bodies also do not have to submit proof of their 'special body of expert knowledge' as part of the application process for recognition (SAQA 2012: 6). This may be because of the fact that SAQA does not seem to want to make a clear differentiation between professions and occupations for the purposes of this process, since

SAQA's definition of professional bodies includes occupational bodies (SAQA 2012: 3).

From a brief review of the literature, inter alia, Abdullah and Threadgold (2007), McQuoidet al.(2007), and SAQA (2012), the following words were commonly used to capture the role of a professional body: formal constitution, represent professionals, specialized knowledge, ethics and public service, professional designations and licensure, status, prestige and power, and continuous professional development.

Having defined and explored the concepts profession and professional body, the researchers now consider the concept 'professional designation', which according to SAQA (2012: 3) 'indicates registration of the individual with a professional body, and, where relevant, the right to practice in the particular field of expertise governed by the professional body.' SAQA mandates professional bodies to develop, award, monitor and revoke its professional designations in terms of its own rules, legislation and/or international conventions. Through the enforcement of CPD, professional bodies give the public, the sector and the government confidence that individual professionals will be striving to continuously improve their skills, knowledge and expertise to offer the highest quality and exemplary professional services. SAQA (2012) also requires professional bodies to set criteria for, promote and monitor continuing professional development (CPD) for its members to meet the relevant professional designation requirements. The professional body in effect acts as a 'community of practice', creating a platform for sharing information and experiences with the group so that the members can learn from each other, and have an opportunity to develop themselves personally and professionally (Lave and Wenger 1991). A community of practice develops around a shared activity or profession and a professional identity is the glue that binds the community together.

While it seems preferable for a number of reasons, that professionals organise themselves and that the professional body space is self-regulatory, it is according to Jütte et al. (2011: 14) 'difficult to be against the arguments for professionalization that are put forward through policy,' The regulation of professions may be in line with their interests but also in some cases in conflict to them (Council for Built Environment

2011: 25). Professional self-regulation, being understood as a regulatory model which enables government to have some control over the practice of a profession and the services provided by its members (Balthazard 2010: 1) seems to be a solution. Self-regulation in this context is based on government confirming the authority of a professional body to regulate the activities of its members by granting self-regulating status.

The South African government is not alone in its attempts to regulate professional bodies and their work through a formal system of self-regulation. For example, Professions Australia which is a national organisation of professional associations in Australia, also has as its main purpose 'the advancement and promotion of professionalism for the benefit of the community' (Australian Council of Professions 2013). In its resolution on market regulation and competition rules for the liberal professions, the European Parliament concluded that 'from a general point of view, rules are necessary in the specific context of each profession, in particular those relating to the organisation, qualifications, professional ethics, supervision, liability, impartiality and competence of the members of the profession or designed to prevent conflict of interest and misleading advertising, provided that they give end users the assurance that they are provided with the necessary guarantees in relation to integrity and experience, and do not constitute restrictions on competition' (Randall 1993: 1).

The brief literature reviewed on professions, professional bodies and the use of a professional designation, has shed light on the definition and internationally accepted understanding of the aforementioned concepts. In line with the objectives of the paper, to explore the 'changing' role of professional bodies in SA post the implementation of the SAQA Act (2012), the study was conducted using the methodology outline below.

METHODOLOGY

A quantitative approach was considered more convenient and cost-effective (Field 2009: 145), and also useful in maintaining objectivity, especially since the primary researcher is employed at a professional body and has working relationships with many of the respondents (McMillan and Schumacher 2006: 23). However,

some elements of qualitative research approaches were included by using open ended questions as it was considered valuable in enriching the research results. The intention was to use the open-ended questions as a 'follow-up data collection instrument pursuing exploratory aspects of the analysis' (Carvalho and White 1996: 19).

The fact that the respondents were based at different centres all over the country motivated the use of an online survey, which is easily accessible (Maree 2010: 145). The research instrument used to conduct the survey was an online survey tool, namely, Survey Monkey. The key themes or traits pertaining to professions, professional bodies and their role as identified from the literature, were used to develop the research questions which were aimed at exploring the opinions of professional body representatives regarding the impact of the NQF Act (2012) on the functioning of professional bodies, and also in establishing the situation before and after the implementation of the NQF Act, for example whether individual professional bodies offered education and training prior to and after the implementation of the NQF Act, and whether there was a significant growth in membership of individual professional bodies after the implementation of the NQF Act.

The questionnaire comprised two sections namely, demographic or background questions and questions with direct relevance to the role of professional bodies. The close-ended questions were designed in the form of a 5-point Likert scale, and the points were labeled appropriately, for example, 1 = Extremely important; 2 = Very important; 3 = Moderately important; 4 = Not very important; 5 = Not important at all.

The questionnaire was pilot tested among a small group consisting of a colleague who understood the professional body space, a senior member of a professional body, and two academics (research experts) who understood the professional body environment. Changes made after the pilot testing included the elimination of unnecessary duplication of questions, by developing matrix questions.

The target population included representatives of the 54 professional bodies who were formally recognized by SAQA in terms of the NQF Act as at 31 July 2013; representatives of professional bodies not yet recognized by SAQA, the management and staff of SAQA, and the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations

(QCTO) involved in the administration of professional bodies.

A total of 201 questionnaires were distributed electronically, and 53 responses were collected from 38 different organisations, representing 50% of the target population. The response rate was regarded as being adequate, especially in view of the fact that most respondents were members of senior management. The questionnaires were also sent to 64 bodies, comprising 52 recognised professional bodies, and 12 bodies not (yet) recognised by SAQA, and 12 officials from government/oversight institutions.

The pilot study confirmed the 'face validity' of the questionnaire. By including all 54 recognised professional bodies as well as an additional group of 12 bodies that were not as yet recognised or were in the process of applying for recognition, the researchers were of the view that the external validity of the study would be strengthened, and the general applicability of the study would increase.

For research of a quantitative nature to be regarded as reliable, it must demonstrate that, if it was carried out on a similar group of respondents in a similar context, then similar results would be found (Cohen et al. 2000: 117). One of the ways to test this, was to look at the consistency between responses; if a respondent had for example responded very positively to question 14 and very negatively to question 20, which in essence tests the opinion of the respondent on the same issue, it could have been an indication that the question was not clear and this could impact on the test-retest reliability of the study. Although there were one or two such cases, for example, where one respondent complains about government interference in the open-ended response, but stated that professional bodies should be government-regulated, this seemed to be an isolated case.

RESULTS

Although the vast majority (78.3%) of the respondents represented professional bodies formally recognised by SAQA, non-recognised bodies and statutory oversight bodies were also adequately represented. For instance, those who were self-employed represented 8.11% of the respondents; statutory body playing an oversight role 8.11%; professional body that does not intend to apply for SAQA accreditation

2.70%; and professional body that applied for SAQA accreditation 2.70%.

It became evident that respondents rated the 'specialised knowledge and expertise' trait the highest, with 'professional ethics and commitment to public service' second. 'Professional autonomy and judgement' and 'professional association' received a joint third place, while 'status and prestige' was rated least important. It was also ascertained that only two professional bodies (out of the 24 that responded to this question) which indicated that they had been delivering specialised education and training prior to the implementation of the NQF Act, are no longer doing this. The other bodies seem to continue with 'business-as-usual'. This was later confirmed through a follow-up question regarding the nature of the education and training offered by professional bodies, indicating that most professional bodies were not been offering 'whole' qualifications in the past. It seems therefore, that professional bodies are not negatively affected by the new prohibition on offering of qualifications.

The majority (51.4%) of professional bodies had not been formally constituted prior to the implementation of the NQF Act. Although the majority (40.5%) of the respondents indicated that less than 20% of their income was derived from education and training, the vast majority (71.1%) indicated that professional bodies should be allowed to offer education and training in their field of expertise and operation.

Table 1 reflects that with the exception of 'rendering public service,' the overall majority of respondents regarded the roles of professional bodies outlined in the table, as being very important.

With regard to the respondents' perceptions of the status and prestige of professionals prior to the NQF Act, the vast majority (83.7%) indicated that they did enjoy some status and prestige prior to the NQF Act, and 97.3% also indicated that the NQF Act had a positive impact on the status and prestige of professionals.

In terms of the impact of the NQF Act on the importance of membership of a professional body, it became evident that the vast majority (83.2%) of respondents indicated that it was high. Although the respondents indicated the membership of their professional bodies had grown significantly since the implementation of the NQF Act and associated 'Policy and Criteria,' a significant group (36.8%) of the respondents

Table 1: The Importance of the role of professional bodies

<i>Response options</i>	<i>Very important</i>	<i>Fairly important</i>	<i>Slightly important</i>	<i>Not very important</i>	<i>Not important at all</i>
Acquiring specialised knowledge and skills	78.95%	18.42%	0%	2.63%	0%
Awarding professional designations or 'licence to practice' to professionals	76.32%	7.89%	7.89%	2.63%	5.26%
Upholding professional ethics and the protection of the public	84.21%	13.16%	0%	2.63%	0%
Rendering a public service	55.26%	31.58%	10.53%	2.63%	0%
Representing the profession that it serves	86.84%	10.53%	2.63%	0%	0%

indicated that the increase was not directly attributable to the NQF Act.

The overwhelming majority (86.8%) of respondents indicated that the NQF Act and resultant recognition of professional bodies had a positive impact on their operations. Although 28.9% of the respondents believed that they should self-regulate, the vast majority (65%) indicated that there should also be oversight by government. With regard to the impact of the NQF Act on ethics and disciplinary practice, only 27 % of the respondents indicated that it had no impact. The vast majority (86.8%) of respondents indicated that professional designations were important prior to the NQF Act and, this majority also indicated that the NQF Act had re-emphasized the importance of professional designations.

Finally, the other functions that professional bodies should perform as indicated by the respondents included: standards setting/input into curricula; quality assurance/ accreditation of academic institutions; networking with other bodies; provide recognised education and training; manage a repository of knowledge; advising SAQA on matters related to the professions

DISCUSSION

The respondents strongly agreed with the 'specialised knowledge and skills' traits as being essential elements of a 'profession', with 'ethics and public service' in a strong second place. However, while ensuring that a body of specialised knowledge and expertise is rated very highly as a function that professional bodies should play, the 'how' of this role is not yet clear. With SAQA's 'Policy and Criteria' prohibiting professional bodies from delivering education and training (whole qualifications), this is not a route open to professional bodies in South

Africa. Professional bodies do however agree that they have a responsibility in this field and most respondents have also indicated 'standards setting' or curriculum design as well as 'quality assurance' or accreditation of providers, as functions that professional bodies should be performing. While SAQA's 'Policy and Criteria' are not prescriptive about the 'body of knowledge' trait of professions, its definition of professional bodies require them to be 'expert practitioners'.

Since only 25 professional bodies indicated that they had previously managed Continuous Professional Development (CPD), whilst 32 indicated that they are only doing so now (after the implementation of the NQF Act). This is an indication that many bodies are quite new at administering CPD and also, that many members of professional bodies are new to adhering to CPD requirements.

The issue of career advice, a function introduced by the 'Policy and Criteria' for Professional Bodies, was deliberately not mentioned as a function by the researchers, as it was not referenced anywhere in the literature on professions or professional bodies. It is interesting to note that none of the respondents mentioned this as a possible additional function either, although, this role may already be performed by the professional bodies in a variety of ways.

Since all professional bodies would have been required by SAQA in terms of the 'Policy and Criteria' for Professional Bodies, to have formal constitutions in place before they are recognized, they would have had to develop formal constitutions if they did not currently have one. This may have been an unintended (positive) consequence of the new legislation, assisting professional bodies in clarifying their goals and focusing their efforts.

It emerged that a number of professional bodies had been involved in the delivery of ed-

education and training prior to the NQF Act. Of particular interest, are those bodies that have been involved in the delivery of full qualifications, since this is no longer allowed under the NQF Act and associated Policy and Criteria for Professional Bodies. As expected, some of the professional bodies which were no longer allowed to offer full and part qualifications indicated that the NQF Act had impacted negatively on their operations. However, in general, respondents were largely positive about the impact of the NQF Act on education and training in their sectors, since most professional bodies will continue with the delivery of non-accredited short training courses for CPD purposes and that this is a good income source.

CONCLUSION

The findings strongly support the significance of traditional traits of professions and professional bodies, and most respondents also rated the traditional roles of professional bodies as, as 'very important'. This confirms that professional bodies in South Africa will continue to play the role 'traditionally' played by professional bodies. It became apparent that professional bodies valued two aspects in particular, namely, that there is now formal recognition for professions that had not necessarily enjoyed great status and recognition before, and that there is now a formal 'minimum standard' for professions and professional bodies.

Furthermore, a need for professional bodies to remain very close to the delivery of qualifications became apparent. Other interesting consequences of the legislation seem to be that many professional bodies had to develop formal constitutions (for the first time) before applying for recognition, and that continuous professional development is now enjoying much more attention, due to requirements of the Policy and Criteria for Professional Bodies. Contrary to expectations, membership of professional bodies had not grown significantly due to the implementation of the NQF Act, nor did members holding professional designations increase drastically.

Many of the professional bodies are not experienced in administering CPD and awarding professional designations. Some of the professional bodies are already working with the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations in terms

of standards setting and quality assurance. However, as many of the professional bodies mentioned this as additional functions, it seems that there is still a lack of awareness of the role that they (professional bodies) could and should play in the trade and occupations space. Professional bodies, having expressed a wish to be involved in both standards setting (curriculum development) and quality assurance (accreditation of providers of education and training), are not prevented from doing so by any regulations and the Policy and Criteria in fact mentions this very specifically as something that professional bodies 'may' do.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Since professional bodies are generally of the view that the impact of the NQF Act is favourable and that they appreciate SAQA's 'light touch' approach which allows for much freedom in terms of self-regulation, this should be retained. At the same time, caution needs to be taken so that this process does not become a mere 'tick-box' exercise, but is one that is aimed at enhancing the quality of education and training and professionalism. For example, the issue of 'specialised knowledge' is not clearly addressed as one of the criteria for becoming a professional body, yet it is regarded by both the literature and the empirical study, as the single most important trait of a profession and professional body. If the traits approach is followed, as SAQA has been doing through the application of its Policy and Criteria, this most important trait, that of a body of knowledge, should receive more attention, both from SAQA and from the professional bodies themselves.

While some of the professional bodies have already been involved with QCTO processes and some 'accredit' providers of education and training for professional designation purposes, other bodies have not embraced this opportunity as yet. The QCTO may need to do more advocacy in this regard, and also 'train' professional bodies on the actual 'how to'.

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