



NATIONAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATION – NPC
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**NSDPA OPINION: SOUTH AFRICA'S QUALIFICATION TRANSITION RISKS
LEAVING LEARNERS AND PROVIDERS BEHIND**

The National Skills Development Providers Association (NSDPA) notes the media briefing delivered by Minister Buti Manamela, supported by leadership from the QCTO, SAQA, the National Skills Authority, and the Department of Higher Education and Training, regarding the transition from legacy (pre-2009) qualifications to occupational qualifications.

While the objectives behind the transition are admirable and have merit in principle, the NSDPA believes that the realities on the ground paint a far more concerning picture than the optimistic narrative often presented by policymakers.

For more than a decade, skills development providers have been adapting to a continuously changing regulatory environment. During this period, providers have invested millions of rands in infrastructure, learning material development, quality management systems, accreditation compliance, assessor and moderator capacity, and learner support services. Yet many now find themselves navigating a system plagued by uncertainty, administrative complexity, and implementation delays.

The question is not whether occupational qualifications are conceptually superior to legacy qualifications. The question is whether the occupational qualifications system is sufficiently mature, resourced, and capable of delivering on its promises.

Unfortunately, evidence suggests that significant challenges remain.

Many occupational qualifications have taken years to move from development to implementation. Assessment systems have often struggled to keep pace with qualification development. Certification delays continue to frustrate learners and employers alike. Workplace placement opportunities remain scarce in many sectors, along with EISA delays, creating a bottleneck that prevents learners from completing qualifications despite having successfully completed the theoretical and practical components.

The result is a system where learners frequently become the unintended victims of policy transition.

The NSDPA acknowledges the recent extension granted to the majority of legacy qualifications, with 534 of the 630 qualifications reportedly receiving an extension. This intervention provides important relief to providers and learners. However, the extension itself should not be mistaken for a resolution of the underlying challenges. The sector continues to face uncertainty regarding implementation readiness, learner articulation pathways, workplace-based learning opportunities, assessment capacity, and the pace at which occupational qualifications can effectively absorb learner demand. The focus must therefore shift from qualification extensions to ensuring that the occupational qualifications ecosystem is fully capable of supporting a sustainable transition.

South Africa cannot afford a transition that reduces access to learning opportunities under the guise of improving quality.

A qualification framework is only as effective as its ability to produce competent graduates at scale. If the new system results in fewer learners being enrolled, fewer learners completing programmes, or fewer providers being able to participate in delivery, then the country risks undermining its own skills development objectives.

Equally concerning is the increasing compliance burden placed on providers. While quality assurance is essential, the regulatory environment has become increasingly difficult to navigate, particularly for small and medium-sized providers that lack extensive administrative capacity. The unintended consequence may be the gradual consolidation of the sector into fewer, larger institutions, reducing diversity, innovation, and access.

The NSDPA further cautions against the perception that legacy qualifications have somehow failed South Africa. Many of these programmes produced thousands of competent artisans, administrators, managers, sales professionals, and technical specialists who continue to contribute meaningfully to the economy today. The challenge has never been the qualifications alone. The challenge has been broader issues including economic growth, labour absorption, workplace opportunities, and systemic inefficiencies. Occupational qualifications should therefore be viewed as an evolution rather than a wholesale correction of a failed past.

The NSDPA calls on the Minister of Higher Education and Training, QCTO, SAQA, SETAs, and industry stakeholders to focus on the following priorities:

- ✦ Ensure that learners enrolled in legacy qualifications are provided with clear transition pathways, uninterrupted access to assessments and certification, and recognition of achievements already attained.
- ✦ Reduce unnecessary administrative burdens on providers.
- ✦ Improve certification turnaround times.
- ✦ Address EISA capacity constraints and assessment backlogs.
- ✦ Expand workplace placement opportunities through stronger employer partnerships.
- ✦ Provide greater transparency regarding qualification development and implementation timelines.
- ✦ Engage providers as strategic partners rather than merely regulated entities.

The success of the occupational qualifications system will not be measured by the number of legacy qualifications that are discontinued. It will be measured by whether more South Africans obtain meaningful qualifications, secure employment, and contribute to economic growth.

The NSDPA supports reform. However, reform must be practical, inclusive, and evidence-based. A qualification system that works well on paper but struggles in implementation serves neither learners nor the economy.

South Africa's skills development challenges require more than structural change. They require a system that is responsive, adequately resourced, and grounded in the realities faced by learners, employers, and providers every day. Until these concerns are addressed, the transition from legacy qualifications to occupational qualifications remains a work in progress.

National Skills Development Providers Association (NSDPA)

Advocating for Providers. Protecting Learners. Strengthening Skills Development