

4. What are the key issues in the design of NQF-registered qualifications?

SAQA has established clear guidelines for the development of qualifications. As in any educational endeavour, however, the unfolding of the NQF has led to various re-interpretations and debates around some aspects of qualifications design, and the building blocks for qualifications: unit standards for unit standard-based qualifications, or outcomes in the case of other types of qualifications.

Generally a qualification is understood as a mark of achievement, a formal recognition that we have acquired certain skills and knowledge. On the NQF it means we are able to do specific kinds of things in particular contexts. We are deemed competent in the area and the level of the qualification. SAQA uses the notion of 'applied competence' to mean the ability to put into practice the learning outcomes that make up a qualification – that is, to mobilise three connected kinds of competence: applied competence is underpinned by Foundational competence (knowing and understanding what and why), Reflexive competence (learning through thinking about application) and Practical competence (knowing how).

In order to fulfil NQF principles such as relevance and flexible and portable learning, SAQA formulated certain requirements for qualifications. The three essential features of a Qualification are that it should have a **defined purpose**, it will give qualifying learners **applied competence** and give them a **basis for further learning**. To make sure these requirements are met, SAQA also set up rules of combination for qualifications. The current requirements deal with the spread of credit values in a qualification, and the requirement that a qualification be made up of three categories or components: Fundamental, Core and Elective learning.

The Fundamental category generally refers to Language and Mathematical competence in terms of the basis for further learning aspect, and it is only these two areas that currently have a compulsory number of credits attached to them within a qualification. Some sectors also use the term Fundamental to cover unit standards that relate to other generic skills, such as life skills, science-related outcomes, or computer literacy.

The Core and Elective categories refer to those parts of the qualification linked to the **purpose** of the qualification. Unit standards themselves are not classified as Fundamental, Core and Elective, but can change according to different purposes for qualifications. Unit Standards themselves are **portable** across qualifications, and will play different roles in different qualifications. In addition, some qualifications are not unit standard-based.

Unit standards all have credit values. Unit standards as the building blocks of qualifications are required to make up a certain number of credits at different levels – essentially a minimum of 120 credits (with certain exceptions), with higher stipulations for Diplomas and Degrees.

The statutory requirements for qualifications as they are currently formulated are given in the Gazette Regulations of 1998 found in Useful Background Information. The key SAQA document outlining qualifications design is *Criteria for the Generation and Evaluation of Qualifications and Standards within the National Qualification Framework* (SAQA, August 2005), which you will find in the Useful Guidelines section of this Page.

Over the past few years, many aspects of unit standards and qualifications have been intensely discussed. Below are three key areas:

- The categories of Fundamental, Core and Elective. There have been many debates about the usefulness of these divisions. Different sectors tend to understand and apply the terms in different ways when designing qualifications. You will find some discussion of these issues in the following documents:
 - The Report of the Study Team on the Implementation of the NQF (DoE and DoL, April 2002) in Useful Background documents on this Page.
 - An Interdependent National Qualifications Framework (DoE and DoL, July 2003) in Useful Background documents on this Page.
 - Proposal for a revised approach to the development and management of occupational qualifications on the NQF (Vorwerk, 2007) in Upcoming Changes on this Page.
- The role of the Fundamentals. The requirements that all candidates must achieve a specified number of credits in Language and Mathematical Literacy at the level of the qualification they are undertaking has been very contentious. You will find coverage of this topic in the following documents:
 - The Quality Assurance of Fundamental components of Qualifications (SAQA, July 2005) in the Useful Guidelines section on this Page.
 - The 'f' word. The quality of the fundamental components in general and further education and training (Umalusi, 2007) in Useful Background Information on this Page
 - The Fundamentals in Occupational Qualifications (King M, 2006) in Useful Background Information on this Page.
- The role of outcomes in qualifications design and the specification of knowledge. You will find two short documents on this topic in the Useful Guidelines sections, and longer discussions in references given in the Useful Background section.

[Answer to FAQ 4, Understanding and Implementing the NQF, the NQF Gateway]