From legacy to labour market: Aligning QCTO Occupational qualifications with industry demands in African TVET

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Abstract. The South African Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector is changing its offering from entrenched legacy qualifications, such as Report 191 and National Vocational Certificate (NCV), to more occupationally aligned qualifications. This is a response to the evolving labour market needs in the South African industry. This study focuses on a specific query on how effectively the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) qualifications support current and future industry demands to enhance graduate employability. The study's primary aim is to measure the extent to which occupational qualifications take the edge off the persistent skills mismatch and investigate strategies for improving institution-industry partnerships. The research methodology employed a qualitative desktop, including document analysis of the National Qualifications Framework Act (NQF), Skills Development Act (SDA), QCTO frameworks, and institutional policies and reports. The study population consists of selected QCTO qualifications in high-demand sectors, and the selection of documents is guided by purposive sampling. Findings show that QCTO qualifications do offer some improvements in curriculum relevance; existing systemic challenges persist. The study concludes that the shift from legacy programmes to industry-aligned qualifications must be reinforced by stronger partnerships between TVET colleges, regulatory bodies, and industry stakeholders. Findings further indicate that the transition to occupational qualifications is promising but remains incomplete. Sustainable impact depends on institutional readiness, clearer articulation pathways for ministerial programmes, and an improved work-placement system.

Keywords: TVET, QCTO, SETA, Occupational Qualifications

1. Introduction

Occupational qualifications have been introduced as a tool to address skills mismatches, but their effectiveness appears limited based on existing literature. In South Africa, occupational qualifications were introduced in 2009 as part of reforms to the National Qualifications Framework (Alphonsus, 2021). These qualifications are designed using occupational standards and modules for knowledge, practical skills, and work experience (Alphonsus, 2021). However, research suggests that these occupational qualifications are not substantially different from previous competency-based qualifications that used unit standards and learning outcomes (Alphonsus, 2021). Concurred by Allais (2023:5), the development of occupational qualifications is guided by employer-identified skills and competencies, and while it aims to make qualifications more responsive to industry needs, limitations exist.

The expansion of TVET colleges in South Africa has been influenced by efforts to produce more responsive, outcomes-based learning models. Historical legacy programmes such as NATED and NCV were misaligned against rapidly transforming industry demands (Windapo, 2016:7). The South African government acknowledged these limitations and established the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) to drive the rapid transformation towards occupationally aligned qualifications that would directly serve the labour market. The evolution of occupational qualifications and Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) in South Africa has been marked by both progress and challenges. Tekwa (2024:122) notes that while SETAs are recognised by employers and provide advantages in securing employment, concerns persist regarding the effectiveness of the current system. Alphonsus (2021) criticises the transition from unit standards to occupational qualifications, arguing that it has not addressed fundamental issues associated with competency-based training approaches. Although improvements in educational outcomes and increased diversity in certain occupations have been observed, Reddy and Mncwango (2021:45) highlight that inequalities persist, particularly for African women. Mtshali (2021:86) identifies ongoing hurdles faced by Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges in equipping students with skills relevant to modern industry needs. Furthermore, Allais (2023:5) argue that the focus on employer-specified competencies fails to account for the realities of informal work in Africa and perpetuates a decontextualised approach to skills development.

The National Certificate Vocational (NCV) and Report 191 programmes in South African TVET colleges face challenges in preparing students for technical careers. Engelbrecht et al. (2017) indicate that NCV tourism graduates lack the practical experience necessary for broader industry employability. The NCV civil engineering curriculum, according to Nkwanyane, Makgato, and Ramaligela (2020:32), is perceived as inadequate for labour market needs and requires urgent revision. Both NCV and Report 191 programmes struggle with digital literacy gaps among students (Buthelezi, Hlalele, & Dhlamini, 2024:270) and imbalances between theoretical and practical training (Du Plooy & du Preez, 2022:105). Lecturers report issues such as insufficient resources, lack of support, and poor work-integrated learning coordination (Williams, Prins, Nkambule & Ngubane, 2024:13). To address these challenges, recommendations include curriculum reviews involving industry experts, continuous professional development for lecturers, and improved monitoring of curriculum delivery processes (Nkwanyane et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2024.

The NCV programme was designed as an alternative to the Department of Basic Education's traditional academic school pathway. They align in NQF levels, however, the key differences lie within each pathway's purpose. NCV is more vocational and industry-focused than the National Senior Certificate, which is more academically oriented. NCV aims to prepare students for specific occupations or industries, which contrasts the more general academic focus of traditional schooling. Therefore, the NCV curriculum is designed to provide both theoretical knowledge and practical skills relevant to particular vocational areas (Du Plooy & du Preez, 2022). Students can enter NCV programmes after completing Grade 9, whereas traditional schooling continues through Grade 12. This allows students who struggle academically or prefer a more vocational path to transition to TVET colleges earlier. These programmes are typically three years in duration. The curriculum on the other hand, includes vocational subjects specific to different fields like engineering, as well as fundamental subjects like English and Mathematics. Thus, it aims to provide more industry-relevant skills compared to traditional academic subjects. Du Plooy and du Preez (2022) conclude that the intention of NCV programmes are to align more closely with industry needs and prepare students for employment, though challenges remain in this area. Traditional schooling, however, has less direct focus on workplace preparation.

Report 191, often referred to as National Accredited Technical Education (Nated), was designed to offer occupational and theoretical training primarily in faculties of engineering, business, and utility studies. Unlike NCV, which was general education with vocational specialisation, NATED is a post-matric pathway, but consists of three shorter semester-based programmes followed by Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) (internship) for 18 months (Buthelezi et al., 2024). This differs from traditional university degrees which are usually 3-4 years of full-time study. Additionally, some university programmes include internships or practical components, it does not form part of their central curriculum structure as in Report 191 programmes. Conversely, Nkwanyane et al., (2020) highlighted concerns that TVET college Report 191 curricula may not always be well-aligned with current labour market needs.

QCTO in South Africa is part of a broader system aimed at improving technical and vocational education and training (TVET) quality and relevance. Recent research highlights challenges in TVET, including the need to update curricula for the fourth industrial revolution, as noted by Magagula and Awodiji (2024), improve industry partnerships (Papier, 2024), and address low throughput rates (Du Plooy & du Preez, 2022). Du Plooy and du Preez (2022) further emphasise the importance of balancing practical and theoretical training, while McGrath and Russon (2023) stress the need to develop skills for both employability and sustainability. Occupational qualifications are designed to be more closely aligned with industry requirements compared to NCV and NATED programmes. They aim to address the "critical collaboration gap between industry and the TVET sector" (Du Plooy & du Preez, 2022) by incorporating more input from employers on skills needs. This is intended to make graduates more employable and work ready.

Occupational qualifications use a competency-based approach, drawing on what Alias (2023) describes as "employer input into skills requirements." This differs from the more academically oriented curriculum of

NCV and NATED programmes. The competency-based design aims to make qualifications more relevant to workplace needs. Work-integrated learning is likely to be a more central component of occupational qualifications. According to Du Plooy and du Preez (2022), current NCV programmes face challenges with "work placement and industry collaboration," which occupational qualifications aim to improve through stronger industry partnerships. Unlike NCV programmes which accept students from Grade 9, occupational qualifications may have higher entry requirements more aligned with industry expectations. Du Plooy and du Preez (2022) note that this shift could address concerns about students lacking "the foundational (secondary school) knowledge and skills required for coping with the course content." Occupational qualifications are also designed to have greater recognition and acceptance by industry compared to NCV and NATED. As Du Plooy and du Preez further observe, "industry and employers are predisposed to appointing NATED students rather than NC(V) students"—a situation occupational programmes aim to correct by offering qualifications more directly shaped by employer input and competency-based design.

Despite QCTO's mandate to modernise qualification design, Windapo's (2016:7) research highlights that the critical shortage in the skilled labour market remains acute, and that TVET colleges' output falls short of meeting industry-specific standards (Perold, Cloete, & Papier, 2012:143). Hondonga and Chinengundu (2021:192) further validate this by comparing vocational skills development models; they suggest that occupational qualifications are at risk of becoming detached from industry-specific standards, like the ministerial predecessors, if they are not tightly integrated with workplace realities. Further criticism added by Allias (2023) emphasises competency-based qualifications and occupational standards, arguing that these approaches may be inappropriate for African labour markets and the complexities of informal work contexts. In parallel, Wedekind et al. (2024) emphasise the need for a more nuanced understanding of TVET lecturer quality, particularly in relation to pedagogical capacity and institutional support. Samuel and Moagi (2022) add to this discourse by highlighting the urgency of developing strategies for skills transition within the emerging digital work system.

Research question:

To what extent do occupational qualifications align with current industry demands in African TVET colleges?

Sub-research questions:

- What are the gaps between the QCTO curriculum content and industry-required competencies?
- What institutional or structural barriers hinder effective delivery of QCTO qualifications?
- What strategies can enhance collaboration between TVET colleges and industry?

The main research problem addressed in this article is the extent to which QCTO successfully align its qualifications with industry-specific standards. Additionally, the study zooms in on historical mismatches between educational outputs and labour market requirements. Even though QCTO laid strong guiding principles, the existence of practical components of curriculum delivery, institutional readiness, and stakeholder engagement raises concerns about the complexity and sustainability of this transition.

2. Objectives

Accordingly, the objectives of this paper are to:

I. Assess how occupational qualifications align with current industry-required competencies.
II. Identify gaps and challenges in the transition from legacy ministerial qualifications to occupational programmes.
III. Propose strategic recommendations for strengthening collaboration between TVET colleges, SETAs, and industry stakeholders.

3. Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative desktop research approach, primarily depending on document analysis as a data collection tool. The key documents reviewed were QCTO curriculum frameworks, SETA sector skills plans, and relevant institutional policies from the selected TVET college. These documents were purposefully selected based on their relevance to the alignment or misalignment of current industry standards in African TVET colleges.

Data was analysed through thematic content analysis and policy mapping strategies to examine curriculum design, articulation from ministerial to occupational programmes, and existing collaboration between TVET colleges and industry stakeholders. This allows for evaluation of alignment intentions and structural coherence to propose strategic recommendations to align QCTO occupational qualifications with industry demands.

Adopting the funnel approach, the researcher systematically narrowed the scope of review from national policies to institutional frameworks to ensure a layered understanding between occupational qualifications and industry demands in African TVET colleges. At the broadest level, the first national document examined was the *National Qualifications Framework Act (No. 67 of 2008) and the Skills Development Act (No. 97 of 1998)*, to understand the legislative intention behind establishing the QCTO. Secondly, *the Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework (OQSF) Policy (2021)* gave insight into types of qualifications and alignment criteria. The researcher progressed to strategic-level documents such as *QCTO Strategic Plan 2020–2025* and the *Annual Performance Plan 2024/25.* These documents were interrogated to ascertain QCTO's priorities in shifting legacy qualifications to more occupationally directed curricula. Further, *realignment of QCTO qualifications* and the *QCTO Accreditation Policy* were examined to evaluate procedural alignment in occupational qualification implementation. Finally, at the narrower part of the funnel, institutional policies, where available, were analysed to evaluate internal reporting of the QCTO agenda.

Figure 1: Document review process

Policy intent

The NQF serves as the umbrella system for qualifications, including occupational qualifications. According to the NQF Act (Republic of South Africa, 2008), Quality Councils (QCs) are responsible for developing and implementing policies within their sub-frameworks. The QCs must develop and implement policy and criteria for development, registration, and publication. Then, QCs must ensure the development of qualifications necessary for their sector and recommend qualifications for the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). In the NQF Act, SAQA is presented as the responsible body for overseeing the NQF and ensuring that South African qualifications meet appropriate criteria and are internationally comparable. The second national document, the Skills Development Act (SDA), makes provision for learnerships that lead to recognised occupational qualifications (Republic of South Africa, 1998). The SDA further supports the design of occupational qualifications by advocating for skills programmes and workplace learning that lead to occupational qualifications.

Quality assurance and accreditation

Quality assurance is a key aspect of maintaining the standard of occupational qualifications. QCs play a vital role in maintaining the quality of occupational qualifications. In addition to developing and implementing policies as mentioned above, they must ensure the integrity and credibility of quality assurance within their sub-framework (Republic of South Africa, 2008).

Learnership agreements between learners, employers, and skills development providers must be registered with a Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA) in a prescribed manner (Republic of South Africa,

1998). SETAs play a role in funding skills programs that align with their sector skills development plan and the national skills development strategy. They are responsible for monitoring the skills programs they fund (Republic of South Africa, 1998). SETAs have the authority to withhold funds or recover funds if they are not satisfied with the training standards or if the terms of funding are not met (Republic of South Africa, 1998).

The NQF system allows for ongoing refinement and improvement. SAQA is tasked with conducting or commissioning investigations on issues important to the development and implementation of the NQF, including periodic studies of its impact on South African education, training, and employment (Republic of South Africa, 2008).

Curriculum alignment

The Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework (OQSF) policy reflects several ways in which occupational qualifications and curricula are aligned with industry needs. In the OQSF's industry-oriented focus, occupational qualifications on the OQSF emphasises multiple qualification types. These include:

- General Occupational Certificate
- Elementary Occupational Certificate
- National Occupational Certificate
- Higher Occupational Certificate
- Advanced Occupational Certificate

The above-listed qualifications were designed with intention to meet expectations of specific occupational roles within the industry (DHET, 2021). Furthermore, the OQSF ensures that there is an alignment between knowledge modules and workplace experience. Students are either exposed to simulations or workshops to ensure that they are thoroughly prepared for real-world settings. Consequently, the National, Higher, and Advanced Occupational Certificates include "simulated or actual work experience and practical experience", reinforcing the commitment to practical learning that model's industry.

Moreover, the OQSF promotes occupational competence by developing learners who can apply knowledge in the workplace. It aims to ensure that students are capable of applying knowledge and competence in an occupation or workplace setting. Thus, DHET ensures that there is an alignment with industry expectations by providing standards determined directly by industry or the profession, underpinning the need for relevance and legitimacy in qualifications. By enforcing these elements, the OQSF aims to ensure that occupational qualifications and curricula are closely aligned with the needs and standards of relevant industries.

Quality assurance and accreditation

At the strategic level, QCTO comes into play by designing and ensuring quality in the Occupational qualifications. During the developmental stage, QCTO consults with industry subject matter experts (SMEs) through Quality Partners. Subsequently, QCTO then implements a national accreditation and quality assurance system for SDPs and assessment centres that offer occupational qualifications. Resulting in the establishment of occupational standards developed by industry experts to ensure that students can fulfil occupational tasks required by industry.

For accreditation, QCTO submits the developing and new occupational qualifications to SAQA for registration. Furthermore, QCTO's strategic plan (2020) states that QCTO also oversees historically registered qualifications and deregisters or redesigns them as needed. This is done to improve quality assurance processes and standardise them across the system. Consequently, curriculum development is standardised, and occupational qualifications are reviewed and rationalised. On the other hand, the Annual Performance Plan (APP) outlines the quality assurance process in more detail, with an initial risk-based quality assurance approach using self-evaluation mechanisms and instruments. Followed by ongoing site-based monitoring and evaluation to ensure QCTO standards are upheld. Accreditation is only issued when SDPs and assessment centres meet the required standards. Again, ensuring relevancy and alignment with industry needs. The APP

emphasises that a quality assurance system ensures consistency and provides the foundation for the verifiable authenticity of certificates issued.

At the operational level, QCTO's accreditation policy (2022) mandates that all education providers offering occupational qualifications under the QCTO framework must meet the outlined accreditation requirements. National standards set forth by DHET, specifically the NQF Act as well as the SDA, should be adhered to by demonstrating both capability and capacity to deliver occupational qualifications at the institutional level.

The QCTO accreditation policy (2022) further mandates that education providers must provide evidence of the following:

- Evidence of qualified facilitators and assessors
- Legal systems including policies
- Occupational Health and Safety standards
- Proof of learner support materials

Programme design requires education providers to align their offerings with QCTO's qualification structure. There are three core components:

- Knowledge or theoretical knowledge
- Practical skills training
- Structured work experience

In addition to these components, an external integrated summative assessment (EISA) is mandatory to ensure that learning outcomes are evaluated, and certification is in line with national standards.

The QCTO accreditation policy further informs education providers about announced and unannounced quality assurance visits. Failure to uphold accreditation requirements may result in having their accreditation suspended or revoked. This ensures that institutions align their programmes and administrative processes with QCTO requirements to maintain compliance for effective delivery of occupational qualifications. Concurrently, the QCTO's realignment policy offers a gateway for education providers currently offering historically registered qualifications. Legacy programmes are being realigned to meet the standards set out in the QCTO accreditation and assessment process (QCTO, 2021). This ensures that there is consistency across all qualifications set out in the OQSF.

Articulation pathways

QCTO's (2021) realignment policy document aims to convert historically registered qualifications into occupational qualifications before their current registration end dates expire. This process is designed to ensure that qualifications on the OQSF conform to the QCTO model. These qualifications include both full qualifications and part qualifications and consist of the above-listed three components of learning, knowledge, practical skills, and work experience. The realignment process considers two types of historically registered qualifications on the OQSF, including *Unit standard-based qualifications* and *Provider-based qualifications.* Then, in terms of relevance, the industry will identify which of the historically registered qualifications will be considered for realignment (QCTO, 2021).

According to OQSF policy (2021), articulation pathways refer to the ways in which students can move between different qualifications within the NQF. Articulation allows for vertical, horizontal, and diagonal progression within the sub-framework, and across the NQF through articulation with other sub-frameworks. Thus, allowing students to move between different types and levels of qualifications. Additionally, there is a focus on improving articulation between the OQSF and other sub-frameworks like the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF). This promotes access to qualifications across different parts of the education and training system. As a result, QCTO aims to facilitate articulation through the use of articulation

pathway maps for each registered occupational qualification and part qualification, both within and between sub-frameworks. These maps will then outline the progression routes for students.

National Certificate Vocational (NCV) can link to occupational documents as per the OSQF policy (2021). NCV level four is recognised to equate to the NSC, Grade 12 as well as the National Occupational Certificate. Students who have completed NCV level 4 may potentially articulate into higher occupational certificates provided they studied similar subjects. If students consider progressing into qualifications offered under the Higher Education framework, the OQSF policy (2021) requires that they complete extra theoretical learning to meet the entry requirements. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is recognised which allows students to gain credit for knowledge that they already have. On the other hand, the Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT), allows students to carry over relevant credits from NCV to Occupational studies.

4. Discussion of Findings

The study's findings offer insights into policy, industry-recognized makers and education providers in the occupational landscape. The NQF Act (2008) and the Skills Development Act (1998) provide an overarching national legislation for occupational qualifications. These national policies mandate the development of sub-frameworks for industry-relevant, workplace-integrated qualifications. By extension the OQSF policy (2021) reinforces alignment by guaranteeing all occupational qualifications are structured around three core components: knowledge, practical skills, and work experience which are designed by SMEs (DHET, 2021). Thus, at the national level, policy serves as a strong theoretical and structural alignment with industry needs.

It is evident by the data in Chapter 4; quality assurance serves as QCTO's priority when it comes to accreditation. The curriculum is designed to reflect industry standards and simulate the workplace, but it faces some implementation challenges. Literature in Chapter 2 indicates that curriculum implementation is uneven despite industry-recognized standards being embedded throughout qualifications. Williams et al., (2024) found that there is inadequate workplace exposure for students, which Du Plooy and du Preez (2022) found that it stemmed from poor industry collaboration in many regions. Thus, even with even if qualifications include practical work integrated learning, it is not guaranteed that students may be placed in industry to complete the practical component of the module.

Articulation and progression are well-established by the OQSF policy (2021) and it clearly defines a multi-lateral articulation pathway for students within the OQSF and across other sub-frameworks in the NQF. Despite these structured articulation pathways, Literature in Chapter 2 suggests that articulation is underutilized in practice as there is little consistency in how articulation opportunities are communicated to students or embedded into institutional policies (Nkwanyane et al., 2020). Similarly, Williams et al. (2024) noted that many lecturers and students were unaware of how RPL and CAT mechanism's function, resulting in limited accessibility. Furthermore, Allais (2023) cautions that without adequate institutional guidance, policy documents from national level remain theoretical. Intensifying these issues, QCTO's Realignment Policy state, "it is important to note that the National N Certificates and National Diplomas—commonly offered by TVET colleges—follow their own separate reconstruction process and are not currently included in the formal QCTO realignment process." Currently, this leaves large cohorts of students with unclear articulation pathways into QCTO-aligned occupational qualifications.

5. Conclusion

The study aimed to assess the extent to which occupational qualifications support industry demands. The findings reveal discrepancies between policy strength and implementation challenges.

At the national level, where policy is drafted, the NQF Act (2008) and the SDA (1998) establish a strong legislative frame of reference for occupational qualifications. Both these Acts mandate workplace integration and industry alignment through sub-frameworks. Second to national-level policies, the OQSF (2021) policy reinforces the mandate by ensuring that the curriculum structure is standardised comprising knowledge,

practice, and work-based experiences – essentially informed by SMEs. For objective I of the study, this confirms clear policy alignment with industry needs.

Conversely, curriculum implementation remains a challenge. The study found that student placement in the workplace (industry) is often inconsistent or unavailable. Literature reviewed in Chapter 2 reinforces this concern by which Williams et al. (2024) echo inadequate exposure to real workplaces for students, and Du Plooy and du Preez (2022) confirm this concern as a weak collaboration with industry across regions in Africa. This creates a clear picture of the extent to which occupational qualifications support industry needs, revealing a misalignment between policy intention and practical implementation.

In terms of the articulation pathways, progress is outlined by the OQSF within and across sub-frameworks supported by RPL and CAT. However, literature reveals that institutional uptake is limited. Academic staff and students are not clued up on how to navigate the progression pathways (Williams et al., 2024; Nkwanyane et al., 2020). Additionally, the QCTO Realignment Policy does not include the Report 191 programmes, leaving a large cohort of students without clear articulation pathways such as that of NCV.

6. Recommendation

In conclusion, Work-Integrated Learning frameworks should be established by education providers and SETAs during programme review cycles. Industry representatives, such as employers and SMEs should be directly involved and informed by curriculum updates to align workplace needs and future trends, particularly in high-demand sectors. Additionally, a shared placement platform should be made available to coordinate student placement by SETAs and education providers. This will ensure that placement can be tracked. To keep lecturers updated, there should be a co-sponsorship between education providers and SETAs for lecturers' joint professional development to ensure that they remain up-to-date with industry immersion.

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