The Higher Education Qualifications Framework: A review of its implications for curricula

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Abstract
This article reports on the findings of a research project which aimed at determining what the key implications of the Higher Education Qualifications Framework would be for the curricula of Universities of Technology. The key problems which were investigated were the seeming lack of understanding of the exact implications of the Higher Education Qualifications Framework and the apparent hesitance on the part of Universities of Technology to start with the implementation process.

By means of a systematic literature review and document analysis the researcher attempted to provide some frame of reference on the implications of the Higher Education Qualifications Framework for the programmes and curricula of Universities of Technology. The research aimed to start off a process of addressing the gap in available literature on the South African Higher Education Qualifications Framework. The research yielded some clear curricular implications of the framework and provided some guidelines for implementation.

INTRODUCTION
The Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF) – is it a tool or a sword? The introduction of the HEQF on 5 October 2007 to regulate all higher education qualifications and programmes or curricula in South Africa, seems to hold far-reaching consequences for the curricula of the higher education sector. For some higher education institutions (HEIs), whose curricula would not be much affected by the prescriptions of the HEQF, it could be a tool for further entrenchment existing academic practices and traditions. However, for others whose curricula would be substantially affected, it could be regarded as the sword of Damocles.

The HEQF can be seen as giving effect to one of the main aims of White Paper 3: A programme for the transformation of higher education in South Africa, which was the proposal for a single qualifications framework for a single coordinated higher education sector (RSA 1997). The HEQF replaces all policy documents which previously regulated higher education in South Africa as a divided and dispersed system. Those policy documents include the former General Policy for Technikon
The HEQF proposes a radical shift from the way in which qualifications were designed in the past. It proposes a ‘nested approach’ to qualifications design which is still much of a foreign concept in higher education circles in South Africa (DoE 2007, 7–8). The nested approach to qualification design comprises a process whereby the NQF level, together with the associated level descriptor, serves as the starting point for the design of a new qualification. Thereafter, the qualification descriptor (for example, a bachelor’s degree) follows. After the qualification descriptor follows the qualification type or designator (for example, Bachelor of Arts), and it is followed by the qualification specification or qualifier (for example, Bachelor of Arts in Music). Because of the ‘new’ approach to qualifications design, as well as the new uniform qualification types proposed by the HEQF, all higher education institutions, and in particular universities of technology (UoTs), are compelled to revisit and redesign all their qualifications and programmes.

In 2009, almost two years after the promulgation of the HEQF, there seems to be an absence of research that provides clear guidelines to HEIs on how to approach the revisiting or reviewing of their qualifications and learning programmes in order to ensure their compliance with the requirements of the HEQF. Nor is there any published analysis of the HEQF and its implications for the qualifications and curricula of UoTs. As a result, it seems as if many UoTs are still battling to fully grasp the implications of the HEQF on their qualifications and curricula. At Tshwane University of Technology, for example, faculties are still in the process of coming to terms with the exact implications of the HEQF for their qualifications and curricula. Very few of the faculties have as yet started with large-scale or structured redesign of their programmes in order to comply with HEQF regulations. Fortunately, although the HEQF came into effect on 1 January 2009, the Department of Education has made provision for a bridging period, of which the duration has not as yet been specified, to allow HEIs to align their qualifications and curricula to the HEQF.

Within the above context, there is clearly a need for some research into the actual implications of the HEQF for the qualifications and curricula of HEIs in order to assist HEIs in the daunting task of redesigning their learning programmes. This article reports on research done to determine what the key implications of the HEQF are with regard to the qualifications and curricula of UoTs. The researcher attempted to provide some guidance to UoTs on the matter by means of a systematic literature review and document analysis.
LITERATURE REVIEW

The Higher Education Qualifications Framework within the global context

The growing importance of qualification frameworks for higher education in the global context is clearly demonstrated by the establishment of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) which is an overarching higher education qualifications framework for Europe. The EHEA had its origin in what is called the ‘Bologna Process’ (Benelux Bologna Secretariat, April 2009). The Bologna Process was the process whereby the EHEA was created because of an identified need for reform in the European higher education sector. It was based on the cooperation between various ministries of education; higher education institutions, students and staff from 46 European countries that participated in the process. It was called the Bologna Process because the declaration to establish the EHEA was signed in the Italian city of Bologna on 19 June 1999 (Benelux Bologna Secretariat, April 2009).

The main aim in creating the EHEA was threefold: to promote and facilitate mobility of students, graduates and staff from various higher education institutions in various countries in Europe; to ensure the preparation of students for future careers and for their roles as active citizens of democratic societies; and to ensure access to high quality and internationally competitive education in Europe as a whole (Austrian Federal Ministry of Science and Research 2008, 3). The EHEA identified three categories of qualifications: bachelor’s, master’s and doctoral degrees. All member countries who subscribe to the EHEA have committed their countries to the development of national qualification frameworks which are compatible to these three categories (Austrian Federal Ministry of Science and Research 2009, 4).

As a consequence of the EHEA, various countries in Europe started to develop their own higher education qualifications frameworks in accordance with the EHEA. Examples of such frameworks are: the National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education in Sweden; the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the Scottish Higher Education Framework; the Higher Education Qualifications Framework in the Netherlands and the Qualifications Framework for Denmark (Swedish National Agency for Higher Education National Qualifications Framework 2009; NVAO 2009; QAA 2008; CIRIUS 2009). The general aims of those frameworks are as follows: To describe the qualifications of their education system and how those qualifications interlink; to describe what knowledge learners should have, their level of understanding and what they should be able to do after completion of a particular qualification; and to describe the opportunities for articulation between different qualifications and the space for mobility of learners (Austrian Federal Ministry of Science and Research 2008, 4–5). The overall purpose of these qualification frameworks was to ensure the quality, consistency and comparability of all qualifications offered by higher education institutions in their respective countries.

The HEQF in turn was created within the South African higher education context with a similar purpose as the above-mentioned frameworks. The main aims of the
HEQF are also very similar to the general aims of the various European higher education qualification frameworks mentioned above. However, the HEQF had an additional purpose, which was to address the former dispersed and divided higher education systems and to combine them into a single system (RSA 1997). With the above contextualization of the HEQF within the broader global context, it is now appropriate to investigate it within its local context.

The Higher Education Qualifications Framework within the South African context

After the broader literature review on higher education qualifications frameworks in general, an attempt was made to find specific literature on the HEQF in SAJHE, but the results were very disappointing. A careful scrutiny of articles which have appeared in the South African Journal of Higher Education (SAJHE) since the publication of the HEQF in 2007 has not yielded even one article with a title clearly focusing on the HEQF.

After the fruitless attempt to find appropriate literature on the HEQF in South Africa, the research was broadened to the other databases. These included the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) Research Publications, the National Research Foundation (NRF), the NEXUS database, the International Journal of Higher Education and the Journal of Higher Education. The only sources found in these databases related to the education frameworks in South Africa, dealt with the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), which is the overall qualifications framework for general and further education in South Africa. Examples of such sources include the following: Cosser 2001; Isaacs and Nkomo 2003; Chisholm 2007; Mukora 2008; Van Huyssteen 2002; Allais 2007; Blom 2007; Keevy 2006 and Matentjie 2005. Since the research project focused specifically on higher education qualification frameworks, a discussion of the NQF was not deemed to be appropriate.

The only sources found within the South African context that deal directly with the HEQF are a document prepared by the South African Technology Network (SATN 2007) and a brief comment on the implications of the HEQF by Higher Education South Africa (HESA 2007). The only other literature that was found merely deals with communications about the interim arrangements for the implementation of the HEQF. Examples of the latter communications are the two communications from the CHE, DoE and SAQA regarding interim arrangements during the phasing in of the HEQF and the phasing out of existing regulations (CHE, DoE and SAQA 2008; CHE, DoE and SAQA 2009).

The absence of sufficient literature on the HEQF could indicate that very little research has so far been conducted on the HEQF and that it is still relatively unexplored terrain. In view of the limited literature on the HEQF in South Africa, the researcher decided to include the two documents (SATN and HESA) as part of the document analyses that form the key research methodology of the research project on which this article is based.
Clarification of concepts

Some of the key concepts used throughout this article are the following: Curriculum, curriculum design, curriculum development, programme and qualifications. It is important that these terms are clearly defined to improve understanding.

Curriculum: There is no one correct definition of the concept ‘curriculum’. Erasmus (2005, 2) states that the different definitions of curriculum can range between very narrow ones to very broad and inclusive ones that could even include all aspects of the entire education system. The narrow definitions seem to only focus on the content of what is to be taught or learnt and assessed. The broader definitions, on the other hand, see curriculum as both content and process (Erasmus 2005, 3). For the purposes of this article, the researcher concurs with SAQA’s (2000, 6) broad definition of curriculum: ‘The curriculum is understood to be more than syllabus documentation. The term refers to all of the teaching and learning opportunities that take place in learning institutions.’

Curriculum design is the process of conceptualising a curriculum and the arrangement of its major components. These components include aspects such as the subject matter, instructional methods, materials, teaching and learning strategies and experiences (Ornstein and Hunkins, as quoted by Erasmus 2005, 2).

Curriculum development, on the other hand, deals with the more ‘technical’ aspects of the curriculum. These aspects include the evolvement of the curriculum, its implementation, its evaluation and the involvement of various stakeholders, procedures and processes (Erasmus 2005, 2).

The HEQF defines a programme as ‘a purposeful and structured set of learning experiences that lead to a qualification’ and a qualification as ‘the formal recognition and certification of learning achievement awarded by an accredited institution’ (DOE 2007, 6).

With a clearer understanding of the key concepts used in this article, it is now appropriate to attend to the research approach and methodology used for the research project.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Problem statement

In view of the promulgation of the HEQF in 2007 with a key aim of creating a single and uniform qualifications framework for all higher education programmes in South Africa, it became apparent that the HEQF would have substantial implications for the nature of programmes and curricula at UoTs. This assertion is based on the fact that UoT programmes were formerly regulated by separate policy documents which had a particular focus on UoT-type qualifications and programmes while the HEQF regulates all higher education programmes from a more generic perspective.

Within this context, the main question which the research aimed to resolve was: To what extent would the HEQF change the nature of programmes offered by UoTs
in South Africa, and how sensible are those changes within the global context of higher education qualification frameworks?

In order to answer this question, the following sub-questions need to be posed:

- How does the HEQF compare to international higher education qualification frameworks?
- How does the HEQF differ from previous policies which regulated the qualifications of UoTs?
- What are the key implications of the HEQF for the curricula of UoTs?

Research approach

The fundamental research approach adopted for this project was the qualitative approach. Two aspects of the qualitative approach made it the most suitable method to follow: (1) the aspect of suitability (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 19; Tesh 1993, 2) and the aspect of validity (Lancy 1993, 24–26; Strauss and Corbin 1990, 19).

The specific methodology used for the research is indicated below.

Research methodology

Systematic literature review

Initially, a systematic literature review of the HEQF within its national and global context was attempted. The aim was to undertake a systematic review of literature on higher education frameworks in general and the HEQF in particular, in order to contribute to the theory of higher education frameworks (Webster and Watson 2002, 4). Furthermore, the use of systematic reviews as a particular research method was also for the purpose of revision and synthesis of existing research with regard to the HEQF and its implications (Andrews 2005, 399).

The various data bases which were consulted have been mentioned above. However, the systematic literature review yielded almost no substantial literature on the HEQF since its promulgation in 2007. As a result, there was not much research within the local context to serve as basis for further theorising or revision and synthesis as indicated by Webster and Watson (2002) and Andrews (2005).

Content analysis

Because of the insufficient research and literature on the HEQF, the research project leaned strongly on the methodology of document reviews. Authors such as Marshall and Rossman (1995, 78) and Atkinson and Coffey (2004, 56–58) state that document review is a key qualitative research method. The researcher used a particular form of document review which is called content analysis. Content analysis is concerned with the systematic scrutiny of all types of documents and the objective documentation of the information obtained (Mayring 2004, 266; Marshall and Rossman 1995, 78).

Three different sets of content analysis were conducted. The first one dealt with a comparison of the HEQF with three international higher education qualification frameworks (these are the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in
England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ); the Higher Education Qualifications Framework in the Netherlands (NQF-HE); and the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) (QAA 2008; NVAO 2009; AQF 2007). The comparison consisted of firstly identifying key components of the four qualification frameworks. The key components are reflected in the findings provided below. Thereafter the HEQF was compared to the three international frameworks based on the key components. The purpose of the comparison was to identify the key similarities and key differences between the HEQF and other frameworks.

The selection of these three frameworks for comparison was done by means of purposeful sampling. Both the United Kingdom and the Netherlands were former colonial powers of South Africa and the South African education system was influenced by these countries’ systems. Furthermore, these countries are also leaders in the field of higher education in Europe and both of them are members of the EHEA. Australia, on the other hand, was selected because, like South Africa, it is located in the Southern Hemisphere. It is also a good benchmark at international level and South Africa’s higher education quality systems and approaches have been significantly informed by examples from Australia.

A second content analysis was conducted on the HEQF and the NATED Report 150. The HEQF was only compared to the NATED Report 150 because all the elements of the policy were contained therein and the NATED Report 151 is merely the document that contains the detailed information about each qualification listed in the NATED Report 150 (DoE 1999). This content analysis was conducted since the research focused particularly on the implications of the HEQF on the curricula of UoTs. Since the NATED Report 150 represented the previous policy documents that regulated the qualifications and programmes of UoTs, it was regarded as an important source for establishing what differences the HEQF would bring about with regard to the programmes and curricula of UoTs. The content analysis consisted of a comparison of the two documents and the identification of the key differences between them.

The third content analysis was conducted on the South African Technology Network’s (SATN) Curriculum Development Committee comments on the HEOF (SATN 2007) and a document issued by Higher Education South Africa (HESA 2007). These documents were reviewed to determine the main interpretations of the implications of the HEQF for the programmes and curricula of UoTs. Since both documents were mainly commentaries on the implications of the HEQF on higher education institutions in South Africa, the researcher merely captured the main comments raised in both documents.

FINDINGS

With the above picture of what the main research methodology for the research project entailed, it is now appropriate to present the findings that resulted from these content analyses.
Findings from content analysis and comparison of the Higher Education Qualifications Framework with international frameworks

The findings from a comparison between the HEQF and the above international higher education qualification frameworks were organised into two categories: similarities and differences.

Main similarities

There seems to be a number of similarities between the four frameworks. In some instances there are similarities between all four frameworks, while in others just between three of them.

The first aspect of similarity between all four frameworks is with regard to their qualification categories. Broadly speaking, the qualifications categories of all four frameworks are more or less similar. All of them start off with a certificate and/or diploma and/or bachelor’s degree at undergraduate level, a master’s degree at postgraduate level and end with a doctoral degree as the highest qualification. However, when it comes to the specific types and names of the various certificates and diplomas, there is a great amount of differentiation.

The remaining aspects where there are similarities across all four frameworks, include the basis for awarding of qualifications; accommodation of new qualifications in addition to the approved ones and the reflection of critical cross-field outcomes. All of the frameworks base the awarding of qualifications on the attainment of learning outcomes and not on the number of years of study. All four of the frameworks are flexible with regards to the accommodation of new qualifications and the qualification descriptors of all four frameworks reflect elements of critical cross-field outcomes.

The aspects where there are only similarities between three of the frameworks are with regards to a distinction between academic and vocational qualifications and the aspect of articulation between the qualifications of academic and vocational institutions. The data seems to indicate that three of the four frameworks (with the exception of the FHEQ) draw a clear distinction between academic and vocational qualifications. It seems as if in all of them there is no equality in terms of levels and outcomes between different qualifications offered by these two sectors. There is also no seamless articulation between the qualifications of the vocational sector with those of the academic sector. In all three frameworks which clearly reflect the articulation possibilities between different qualifications, it seems as if the UoT qualifications (e.g. the diploma) are regarded to be at a lower exit level than the qualifications from traditional universities.

Main differences

A number of differences can also be distinguished from the data. For the purpose of this article, the differences were divided into two groups: Those that are of a general nature between any or some of the frameworks and those specific differences between the HEQF on the one hand, and one or more of the other frameworks on the other hand.
The general differences include aspects such as credits, differences in qualification levels, the year of establishment and early exit qualifications. With regards to credits, not all of the frameworks are credit-based. Only the HEQF and the NQF-HE frameworks are credit-based. With regards to qualification levels, most of the frameworks have qualifications at various levels. However, these levels all differ from each other (even the levels of the NQF-HE and the FHEQ, whose respective countries are both members of the EHEA). The AQF does not even mention levels. In terms of the year of establishment, all of the frameworks differ. The oldest framework is the AQF, which was established in 1995 while the others were established between 2004 and 2008. Finally, it seems as if some of the frameworks allow for early exit qualifications (for example, where a student who was registered for a three-year diploma only completed one year of the diploma and dropped out). Such a student could be issued with a one-year certificate. The FHEQ allows for early exit qualifications while others, like the HEQF, do not.

The areas in which the HEQF specifically differs from the other frameworks, are with regards to the aspect of level descriptors and the ‘nested approach’ for qualification design. The HEQF is the only framework which uses level descriptors. Level descriptors are used to describe an increasing complexity in learning outcomes between the different levels of each qualification. The HEQF is also the only framework which uses the ‘nested approach’ (see introduction for an explanation of the nested approach) to qualification design. Although the HEQF also includes qualification descriptors and standards as part of the design process, similar to some of the other frameworks, the nested approach seems to be unique to the HEQF in this context.

Findings from a content analysis and comparison of the Higher Education Qualifications Framework with previous qualification policy documents for universities of technology

The key differences between the HEQF and the NATED Report 150 can be grouped into four categories. These categories comprise the aspect of UoT specific focus; terminology and concepts; credits and articulation and qualifications design.

In terms of a specific UoT focus, NATED focused specifically on UoT instructional programmes only while the HEQF focuses on all HE instructional programmes. NATED regulated UoT specialisation in vocational education while the HEQF caters for all types of higher education institutions and therefore only uses the qualification descriptors to identify the essential nature of each qualification. NATED created UoT-specific qualifications while the HEQF created new generic qualifications for all HEIs. NATED promoted the convenor system while the HEQF does not make provision for a convenor system.

With regards to terminology and concepts the NATED report made use of concepts such as M1, M2 and M3 to indicate the year level after Grade 12. The HEQF in turn, works on the basis of NQF levels, which starts at NQF level 5 for HE qualifications and moves right up to NQF level 10. NATED made use of the concept
of A, B and C subject or course content, which represented the different levels of complexity and cognitive depth of qualifications. The HEQF on the other hand uses the level descriptors which consist of 10 categories to indicate the level of depth and complexity of qualifications at each level. NATED uses the concept of ‘experiential learning’ to refer to actual workplace experience while the HEQF uses the concept of ‘work-integrated learning’ (WIL).

In terms of credits and articulation, in the case of NATED, the credit value of each instructional offering is in direct proportion to its scope and is expressed to the third decimal place, for example, 0.025 credits. The total credits for a one-year course according to NATED are one credit. In the case of the HEQF 10 notional hours are equal to one credit, and the minimum number of credits for a one-year course is 120. Furthermore, NATED only made provision for direct articulation between UoT programmes while the HEQF makes provision for articulation and credit transfer between the programmes of all HEIs, although it does not regard diplomas and bachelor’s degrees to be at the same level.

With regards to qualifications design NATED followed an approach of ‘expert structuring of instructional programmes, expert and distinctive curriculum development’ by UoTs. The HEQF on the other hand uses the nested approach for qualification design as explained earlier. Furthermore, with regards to qualifications, NATED allowed for early exit qualifications but the HEQF does not make provision for early exit qualifications.

Findings from a content analysis of the documents of the South African Technology Network and Higher Education South Africa

The SATN document yielded a number of concerns with regard to the HEQF, which includes the impracticality of the implementation date; unequal credit allocation; articulation restrictions and the apparent attempts to render UoTs as ‘bedrock institutions’ (SATN 2007). SATN argues that, in view of the extensive curriculum redesign which especially UoTs would have to embark on, the implementation date of 1 January 2009 of the HEQF, is impractical. Furthermore, SATN expressed its unhappiness with the unequal allocation of credits for the UoT diploma in comparison with the bachelor’s degree. Both qualifications amount to a total of 360 credits, yet the exit level for the bachelor’s degree is at NQF level 7 while the exit level for the diploma is NQF level 6. The latter situation will add an extra year to the studies of UoT students who want to pursue degree or post-graduate studies. SATN also expresses itself against the restrictions placed on UoT students with regard to articulation between UoT qualifications and those of traditional universities. For example, only a maximum of 50 per cent of a completed qualification will be taken into account when switching from a diploma to a bachelor’s degree. SATN also reckons that there is apparently an attempt by the HEQF to steer UoTs towards becoming ‘bedrock institutions’ (that is, institutions only offering undergraduate qualifications, mainly certificates and diplomas). This assertion is based on the fact
that envisaged enrolment targets prescribed by the DoE for UoT programmes are as follows: minimum 70 per cent (preferably 80%) at diploma level, 13 per cent (maximum 14%) at degree level and only 6–7 per cent at post-graduate level (SATN 2007, 2). This, in real terms within the Tshwane University of Technology context, would mean that of the current 51 000 students 40 800 (80%) would be registered for diplomas, only 6 630 (13%) for bachelor’s degrees and only 3 570 (7%) for postgraduate degrees.

In addition to the concerns indicated above, the SATN document lists some specific criticisms against the HEQF. The first of these criticisms is the huge cost implications which UoTs would face if they want to offer degree programmes jointly with diploma programmes. The chances are that UoTs might lose many students if they only offer degree programmes because of the higher entry requirements. Therefore, they will either have to offer both degree and diploma programmes or continue to offer only diploma programmes at undergraduate level. Secondly, there are also huge implications for the curricula of UoTs in comparison with the curricula of traditional universities, since the qualification types proposed in the HEQF are very similar to traditional university qualifications, but very different from traditional UoT qualifications. UoTs will have to embark on more extensive recurriculation of programmes in comparison with traditional universities. Finally, SATN criticizes the abandonment of the B.Tech. (as a staggered degree). The latter will also add another year to the studies of a UoT student in order to reach Master’s and Doctoral levels and this might deter many UoT students from pursuing postgraduate studies.

The Higher Education South Africa document (HESA 2007, 2 and 3) also yielded some concerns with the HEQF. The first concern is that there could be massive increases in enrolments for bachelor’s degrees and alarming decreases in diploma enrolments, due to the abandonment of the B.Tech. degree previously offered by UoTs. Such a development could have negative consequences for vocational education, since undergraduate diplomas and certificates are specifically designed for vocational education, while bachelor’s degrees are not. Secondly, HESA reckons that the consequences of poor articulation arrangements between the diploma and bachelor’s degrees, for example, an additional year for UoT students, would be to the disadvantage of UoT students.

To conclude all the findings indicated above, and to promote a better understanding of the differences between the current UoT qualifications and the new HEQF qualifications, Table 1 and Figure 1 are included to illustrate those differences.
Table 1: Comparison of current UoT qualifications with new HEQF qualifications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Current UoT qualifications (based on new NQF levels)</th>
<th>New HEQF-based qualifications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Certificate</td>
<td>Higher Certificate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NQF exit level: 5</td>
<td>NQF exit level: 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credits: 120</td>
<td>Credits: 120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Name change)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Higher Certificate</td>
<td>Advanced Certificate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NQF exit level: 6</td>
<td>NQF exit level: 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credits: 240</td>
<td>Credits: 120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Name, level and credit change)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Diploma</td>
<td>Diploma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NQF exit level 7</td>
<td>NQF exit level: 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credits: 360</td>
<td>Credits: 360 (only 60 at level 7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Name change)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
<td>Advanced Diploma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.Tech.</td>
<td>NQF exit level: 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NQF exit level: 8</td>
<td>Credits 120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credits: 120</td>
<td>(New)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Abandoned)</td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M.Tech.</td>
<td>NQF exit level: 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NQF exit level: 9</td>
<td>Credits: 120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credits: 120</td>
<td>Abandoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abandoned</td>
<td>MA, MSC, MBA, MED, MCOM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D.Tech.</td>
<td>NQF exit level: 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NQF exit level: 10</td>
<td>Credits: 360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credits: 120</td>
<td>Abandoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abandoned</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

NB: Previously, students could get direct access to post-graduate level (B-Tech) from a diploma. With the HEQF that is no longer possible.
Based on the above findings, the researcher interpreted these findings and reached the conclusions indicated below.

**CONCLUSION**

Because of the three different content analyses which were conducted, the researcher first indicates the conclusions which emanated from each of the document analyses separately. Thereafter these conclusions are synthesised into overall conclusions.

**Conclusions based on the comparison of the Higher Education Qualifications Framework with other global frameworks**

Firstly, based on the comparison of the HEQF against other higher education frameworks, it seems as if there are no radical differences between the HEQF and other frameworks. In other words, the HEQF can be regarded as a standard or typical qualifications framework for higher education institutions. Secondly, it seems to be a common trend among international frameworks (including the HEQF) to draw a clear distinction between vocationally oriented qualifications and academic qualifications. Thirdly, it seems that in most cases, there is no seamless articulation between the specific vocationally oriented qualifications and the more academic qualifications. The HEQF’s downgrading of the diploma against the bachelor’s degree could merely signify a compliance with international trends regarding the qualifications of vocational institutions versus academic institutions.
Conclusions based on scrutiny of the Higher Education Qualifications Framework against criticisms from the South African Technology Network and Higher Education South Africa

Firstly, it seems as if both SATN and HESA agree that the HEQF will have a negative impact on enrolment patterns at UoTs as a result of the removal of the BTech and because of the unequal exit levels of the diploma and bachelor’s degree. Secondly, based on the lower classification of the diploma and the specific enrolment targets for UoTs, it seems as if indeed there might be an attempt to render UoTs as bedrock institutions. Thirdly, even if UoTs would attempt to offer bachelor’s degrees, it could become very costly and unsustainable to do so, since they will have to offer both degrees and diplomas concurrently due to the current needs and entry level of the majority of their students. In the fourth instance, it also seems evident that the changes resulting from the HEQF would also affect the teaching and learning practices at UoTs negatively. For example, because of the lowering of the exit level of the diploma, the teaching and learning outcomes and practices for third-year diploma students will have to be lowered accordingly to fit in with second year, NQF level 6 outcomes. Finally, the removal of the B.Tech. and the introduction of another level (as illustrated in Table 2) cause a huge academic setback for UoTs because it creates a bigger gap between undergraduate and postgraduate levels. For example, UoTs will have to develop two new qualifications to fill the gap, which are the Advanced Diploma and the Postgraduate Diploma.

Conclusions based on the comparison of the Higher Education Qualifications Framework with the NATED Report 150

Firstly, the fact that, the HEQF differs from the NATED Reports with regard to all 11 comparison criteria, seems to indicate that the HEQF will require extensive changes and redesign of UoT programmes and curricula. Secondly, due to the fact that the HEQF regulates all higher education qualifications and institutions, it seems as if vocational education was forced to compromise on a number of issues in order to comply with generic regulations. These in particular include the elimination of the BTech, the changing of names of its qualifications and the downgrading of one of its core qualifications (the diploma).

Overall conclusions (Synthesis)

As indicated in the introduction of this article, the main aim with the research was to determine the key implications of the HEQF on the curricula of UoTs. Based on the above conclusions some key curriculum implications can be distinguished. Firstly, it is clear that all UoT programmes and curricula will have to be redesigned due to the changed number of credits, level descriptors, qualification descriptors and different names of the qualifications. Secondly, UoTs will have to develop a number of new qualifications including the advanced diploma and the bachelor’s degree due to the prescribed new qualifications. Thirdly, UoTs will have to choose between the offering
of diplomas and/or bachelor's degrees in order to ensure the continued vocational or professional focus of UoT qualifications. In the fourth instance, UoT curricula will have to be designed according to the nested approach and will have to be based on level descriptors (no longer on the basis of A, B or C subject contents). In the fifth instance, all UoT qualifications will have to be developed as full qualifications without the option of early exit levels since the HEQF does not make provision for early exit qualifications. Finally, all UoTs will have to design and develop their own curricula without the convenor system since the HEQF also does not make provision for a convenor system.

Based on the above conclusions, the researcher makes the following recommendations:

- Because of the specific descriptor of each qualification which demonstrates its nature, faculties and departments will need to be very careful when they select which qualification type to adopt since some of them (for example bachelor's degrees) are clearly not intended to be of a vocational nature.

- Because of the massive redesign of programmes and curricula, UoTs will need to plan carefully which qualifications in each faculty to start off with and how to structure the redesign process over a period of time. It would cause too much disruption to attempt to start with all programmes at the same time.

- UoTs need to decide between the offering of bachelor's degrees and diplomas and certificates or dual mode. Aspects such as cost implications, sustainability, client needs and industry demands will have to be carefully considered.

In conclusion, considering all its implications for the curricula of UoTs, the HEQF can indeed to some extent be regarded as the sword of Damocles, for example with regard to the axing of the B.Tech., the downgrading of the diploma and the apparent forcing of UoTs to become bedrock institutions. However, seen from a positive point of view it could also offer many advantages for the UoT sector. For example, it creates the opportunity for UoTs to carefully revisit their existing qualifications and to eliminate the weak elements from their curricula. Furthermore, the fact that the HEQF now makes it possible for UoTs to offer exactly the same qualifications, with the same credit values, at the same NQF levels and with the same articulation possibilities as those of traditional universities, creates a wonderful opportunity for UoTs to shed the negative stigma which was always attached to UoT qualifications, namely that UoT qualifications were of an inferior nature to those of traditional universities. Furthermore, due to the fact that UoTs can now offer undergraduate degrees with the same entry requirements as those of traditional universities, will allow them to also attract the better performing students from the secondary school sector which will enhance throughput levels and the quality of graduates. This will help to destroy the myth that the UoT sector only or predominantly caters for the poor performing students who could not gain entry to traditional universities because of not meeting entry requirements. Overall it seems as if the advantages brought
about by the HEQF for UoTs could in fact outweigh its negative consequences. Perhaps the HEQF can indeed become a tool to emancipate vocational education in South Africa!

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