Career development within the context of the South African National Qualifications Framework

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Abstract
This article presents a descriptive account of the national approach to career development that is being introduced in South Africa through the establishment of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and Career Advice Service by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and the Department of Higher Education and Training. The article attempts to reflect on the approach followed by arguing for the recognition of the underlying career development theory and also by inviting constructive engagement from both the South African and international career development community. By recognising the emerging (also referred to as qualitative) approach to career counselling that is gaining favour in the international context, the article explores the influences on this emerging South African career counselling model. In particular, consideration is given to the important influence on the model through learnings from a career counselling centre established in the 1970s during the apartheid era, similar developments in the United Kingdom and New Zealand, as well as the findings of a comprehensive review of the career counselling landscape commissioned by SAQA in 2009 (Flederman 2009). The unique association of the national approach to career counselling with the South African NQF is put forward as a distinguishing factor with significant potential that needs to be further exploited.

If guidance services are to have the desired impact there needs to be a major paradigm shift in the way they are viewed and delivered in South Africa. The heritage of career guidance and counselling services in South Africa is one in which the field was dominated by psychologists, emphasised psychometric testing and assessment, and a ‘one to one’ relationship between client and guidance staff. This focus is not uncommon in many developing countries. This focus was narrowed even further by the emphasis on delivery of services [to] the white citizens in South Africa (World Bank Report on Career Development in South Africa, Kay and Fretwell 2003, 54).
INTRODUCTION

Under the leadership of the Department of Higher Education and Training, the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) is currently in the process of establishing a comprehensive career development system for South Africa. The intention is to serve the country as a whole through a multi-channel approach that includes a Career Advice Helpline staffed by career advisors (e-mail, telephone/cellphone, walk-in), a national radio campaign, a print media campaign via free newspapers, careers exhibitions and an interactive website that includes mobile access. The integrated service aims to establish a career development service for the nation as a whole, including designated groups, unemployed people (specifically women), those in the informal sector of the economy and individuals not normally reached by existing services, such as disabled people for whom physical access to a career centre may be challenging, as well as people located in rural and informal settlements. The service being introduced has been championed by SAQA and builds on existing pockets of career services being offered in South Africa, by among others, private institutions, education and training providers, the Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) and the Department of Labour. The design of this service is based on the challenge of how to provide a national career development system for all that is effective and affordable. This challenge includes the extent to which the service can be linked to labour market analysis and economic sector research, and as a result, also be able to match the profiles of skilled people to the changing demands of society and the economy. It is argued that the extent of the service required can best be provided by the State, within an overall national plan, and in partnership with civil society to develop national strategic leadership in the field.

The specific approach adopted by SAQA in developing a comprehensive career development service is grounded in four main areas. The first influence is the insight gained from the development and implementation of the South African National Qualifications Framework (NQF) since 1995. It is not per chance that the career development service is being overseen by SAQA and operated from within the NQF infrastructure: it is this relational structuring with its focus on access, success, integration, progression and quality that drives the services. South Africa is one of the few, if not the only country with a career service of this nature that is directly related to its NQF system. The second influence on the career development model is the experience of current SAQA staff and associates gained in a non-racial and altogether inclusive career guidance initiative which was established by Shirley Walters, outside the official structures of the time, in the 1970s in Cape Town and other parts of the country. Together with other non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as the South African Committee for Higher Education (SACHED) Trust established in 1959, these centres provided non-racial career information and counselling services at a time when the national system, overseen by the then Department of Manpower, served the white community only. A third influence on the approach adopted by SAQA is the findings of a recent comprehensive review of the South African career
The review researched inclusive career development models elsewhere. It points out that in line with the ongoing legacy of apartheid, the offering of career guidance available in South Africa, that is not linked to SAQA was until that time uncoordinated and ‘almost exclusively focused on white communities and heavily dominated by psychologists operating with a directive “test and tell” tradition’ (Walters, Watts and Flederman 2009, 571). On the more positive side, the review points out that significant progress had by that time been made in South Africa towards a more inclusive education and training system, operating on broad-based lifelong learning principles, providing a conducive environment wherein a national career counselling service could be developed. This finding is supported by the extensive work done by the SETAs that have overseen several career development and advisory projects focusing on scarce and critical skills needs, learners in schools, colleges and universities, and on formally employed people in each sector. Lastly, it is important to recognise that the emerging South African model draws on existing models from South Africa and other models from the United Kingdom and New Zealand, most notably the multi-channel helplines Next Step, and on Careers New Zealand which were developed on the same premise of access, inclusion, feasibility and affordability.

This article presents a descriptive account of the national approach to career development that is being introduced in South Africa by SAQA and the Department of Higher Education and Training in an attempt to make the approach more explicit and also invite constructive engagement from both the South African and international career development community. The article includes a review of current literature on career development with a specific focus on emerging career theory. Data relating to the telephone helpline is sourced from SAQA. The article is written by three SAQA staff members, one of whom is the manager responsible for the establishment of the NQF and Career Advice Service at SAQA. In particular, the article considers the extent to which this inclusive model is not only aligned with the emerging international shift towards qualitative approaches in career guidance, but also the unique association the model has with the South African NQF.

**RECONSTRUCTING CAREER DEVELOPMENT: A QUALITATIVE APPROACH?**

The field of career development has undergone considerable changes in recent times. The field is characterised by a variable and complex theoretical base, with traditional career theory tending to focus only on specific discrete concepts relevant to individual career behaviour, while other theories have inevitably been undervalued. The traditional approach to career development based on a positivist paradigm, and strongly influenced by the American psychological framework, must be understood in the context of a period when the world of work essentially provided individuals with a job for life, and the predominant issue brought to counselling was that of career choice at a specific point in time, usually at school-leaving age. Knowledge about the world of work in order to facilitate career choice also became an essential
component of the career development process and, as a result, career development was seen as an objective cognitive problem-solving process whereby matching knowledge about self and knowledge about the world of work would result in a sound career choice. This individualised psychological approach lent itself comfortably to the use of psychometric assessment of elements of the intrapersonal system of the client, such as ability, personality, self-concept and aptitude. Assessment figured significantly in career development and part of the role of the counsellor was to administer assessment instruments, interpret the results and convey them to the client (Patton and McMahon 2006). This approach also portrayed the role of the counsellor as one of an expert who would advise a client what to do. This approach dominated career development for much of the 20th century, but is proving inadequate for the current generation of young people who are living in an increasingly complex world that requires a more appropriate theoretical base, as noted by Patton and McMahon:

The theoretical map underpinning career counseling in the 21st century is markedly different from that which existed when career counseling first began (2006, 155).

Increasingly, writers are calling for a reconstruction of career counselling to be more effective. A significant group of career counsellors and career psychologists have been advocating a reform of career counselling into an interpretive discipline. These include Savickas (1993), Bradley (1994), Goldman (1994), Subich (1996), Okocha (1998) and McMahon and Patton (2006). The call has come to keep pace with the significant societal, workforce, economic, political and geo-political changes, notably as large parts of the world are slowly emerging from serious financial recession. Coupled with this is the significant shift in environmental focus towards a more sustainable way of living and conducting business. These imperatives are linked to the renewed focus on a constructivist and holistic worldview, which have caused a rethink of career counselling and advice methodologies and content to ensure that the people who will populate the work place in the next decades have the necessary knowledge, skills and competence required.

Assessment has been integral to the work of career counsellors since the profession originated in the early 1900s with the work of Parsons (1909). Since that time, the type of assessment has largely determined the structure of the counselling process and the roles assumed by counsellors and clients. Most of the emphasis on career assessment has focused on quantitative assessment and career counsellors have been slow to move from this traditional position (McMahon and Patton 2006). Traditionally career counselling has been depicted as a linear process with strong emphasis on assessment. This approach sits comfortably with the logical-positivist worldview, with its emphasis on objective, value-free knowledge. More recently the constructivist worldview with its emphasis on meaning-making, active agency and holism has influenced advances in career theory and practice. Corresponding with this worldview shift, there has been a renewed interest in the use of qualitative career assessment approaches, including also collectivist sociological elements that
suggest provisioning of services through collective rather than individual action, often also advocating governmental solutions to social problems. The qualitative approach involves the use of a greater degree of subjectivity, personal opinions and perceptions. This approach is often used when it is necessary to examine and perhaps understand human behaviour, mostly in work situations, but not restricted to work situations. According to Goldman (1990; 1992; 1994) and Subich (1996), a qualitative approach has the potential to address the shortcomings of the traditional quantitative approach, which is unable to respond to issues of diversity and contextual influences, while it continues to rely on the counsellor as the ‘expert’. In this regard Goldman (1990, 205–206) suggests that qualitative assessment:

• fosters an active role for the client who is actively involved in collecting information and elaborating meaning;
• tends to be more holistic and integrative;
• emphasises learning about oneself within a developmental framework;
• promotes a more collaborative relationship between client and counsellor;
• may be used effectively in groups because they foster learning and growth;
• is flexible and adaptable and therefore valuable for use with clients from diverse backgrounds.

McMahon and Patton (2006) conclude that qualitative career assessment may not be the relative newcomer to career counselling that some people believe it to be. However, there is acknowledgement that as an approach, qualitative career counselling and assessment has been overshadowed ‘throughout the history of the profession until the relatively recent influence of constructivism’ (McMahon and Patton 2006, 173). They also suggest that qualitative assessment should not necessarily replace traditional forms of assessment, but rather that they may co-exist in complementary ways. Proposing a ‘systems theory framework’ located within a constructivist worldview, they argue that individuals cannot be seen in isolation, but rather that the individual’s social system should be viewed more holistically, influenced by the broader environmental and social system wherein it is located. Maree, Bester, Lubbe and Bech (2001) also started questioning the proven career assessment methods of the previous era which embraced qualitative career theory and assessment in equal measure to that of quantitative career counselling. They called for a contemporary approach in which they believed it was essential for career counsellors to take cognisance of the shift and to adjust their academic discipline to accommodate these changes, particularly towards qualitative methods.
Table 1 summarises the main changes in the field of career development in recent times.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Traditional career theory (dominant in the 20th century)</th>
<th>Emerging career theory</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>World of work essentially provided individuals with a job for life; mainly for career choice at school-leaving age</td>
<td>Increasingly complex world; significant societal, workforce, economic, political and geo-political changes; shift to increased sustainability and holistic worldview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paradigm</td>
<td>Positivist; logical-positivist</td>
<td>Constructivist, postmodern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examples of career development theories</td>
<td>Social cognitive career theory</td>
<td>Systems theory framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>Extensive use of psychometric assessments of intrapersonal dimensions; mainly quantitative; linear process</td>
<td>Qualitative with a focus on an active client, integrative and holistic; more flexible and adaptable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of career counsellor</td>
<td>To administer assessment instruments, interpret and convey results; counsellor as &quot;expert&quot;</td>
<td>Collaborative relationship between client and counsellor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>Specific concepts relevant to individual career behaviour; objective cognitive problem solving process; individualised psychological approach</td>
<td>Career counselling as an interpretive discipline; collectivist sociological approach</td>
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This review of literature relating to career theory suggests that a balanced approach to career development and counselling is required for the 21st century. While this approach should incorporate elements of traditional career theory, it should also incorporate complementary elements of emerging career theory, notably the thinking evident in the systems theory framework. While this emerging approach to career development may be broadly defined as ‘qualitative’, this categorisation is perhaps also misleading in that it can be interpreted as being limited to qualitative forms of assessment, which is not the case.

Considering this international shift towards a more balanced approach to career development the following section introduces the South African approach to the development of a national career development centre, as it starts to explore the extent to which the approach has embraced the new thinking in the field of career development.

**INTRODUCING A NATIONAL CAREER DEVELOPMENT SYSTEM IN SOUTH AFRICA**

In acknowledging the critical need to expand access to career development services to all South Africans irrespective of age, gender, disability or race, SAQA started to investigate the feasibility and form of a South African national career advice service as recently as 2005. At the outset it was evident that the location of the service within the organisational structure of SAQA, and more broadly the domain of the NQF, was going to be important if not contested. It was agreed at the outset that a more holistic approach to career development would be needed, one that would move beyond the limitations and exclusivity of the existing and largely ineffective traditional model based on psychometric assessments dominated by psychologists. The agreed approach, while not named at the time, would be to enable the broad South African population to access career services while considering their individuality and lived experiences. Considering the approaches to career development described in the
previous section, it is increasingly evident that the approach being considered at the time was distinctly qualitative and in accordance with the new approach being considered within the broader international career development discourse.

Four main influences on this emerging qualitative model of career development for South Africa are evident and important to consider. The first is the insight gained from the development and implementation of the South African NQF since 1995. Initially developed as a transformational mechanism, the South African NQF is now understood as a facilitating mechanism with a strong focus on communication, collaboration and coordination (Parker and Walters 2008). In this regard it is important to take note that while national, regional and even transnational qualifications frameworks are being implemented in many countries and regions across the globe very few have aligned career advice services directly to the qualifications frameworks. In this regard the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework, which is linked to a vibrant multi-channel helpline, is possibly the only exception. It is important to note the fact that the South African approach to career guidance utilises the NQF as a navigational tool that organises the education and training system. Considering South Africa’s history and the lack of national capacity to offer a career advice service, SAQA, in consultation with both the Departments of Education and Labour, took the decision to lead and coordinate the establishment of a national service within the context of the NQF. The decision has proved to be useful, both in terms of accessing accurate and up to date information on the education and training system, and in terms of the reciprocity benefit to the development of the NQF itself. Blockages in the system have become more apparent and, as a result, have been addressed more timeously.

SAQA, working with the Department of Higher Education and Training, and with initial three-year funding secured from the National Skills Fund, has moved ahead with the establishment of the national NQF and Career Advice Service in 2010. Currently the Service has a staff complement of 16 on the telephone helpline, which is servicing 2,000 calls per month.

The second influence on the career counselling model in South Africa is the earlier experiences of SAQA staff and associates related to the establishment of a non-racial and inclusive career guidance initiative in the 1970s in Cape Town. The Careers Research and Information Centre (CRIC) provided non-racially based career information and counselling services in a context where the then Department of Labour provided services exclusively for white people. It was only in the late 1980s that Government started to provide career guidance to other race groups, using mainly group counselling and self-help methods in order to respond to the huge numbers. An important feature of CRIC was to develop an effective and relevant model of career guidance that challenged the dominant information dissemination or transmission models for all citizens of South Africa, irrespective of race, social class or gender. CRIC services included the only national source of research, produced and disseminated career information; Rogerian-based counselling; counselling skills training; career awareness workshops; rural mobile outreach; work experience
programmes; and community-based career advice centres (Walters et al. 2009). In many ways the CRIC model was ahead of its time, not only in terms of challenging the existing political dispensation, but also in terms of challenging the dominant model of career guidance which privileged a few at the expense of the masses. The CRIC model provided South Africa with an approach that could reach large numbers of people, but that would also move beyond the traditional model biased towards psychometric assessment.

The third and most recent influence on the approach adopted by SAQA is from the findings of a comprehensive review of the South African career guidance landscape and international equity-driven models conducted in 2009 (Flederman 2009). The review points out that due to the ongoing legacy of apartheid, the general career guidance system available in South Africa remains ‘almost exclusively focused on white communities and heavily dominated by psychologists operating with a directive “test and tell” tradition’ (Walters et al. 2009, 571). The review recommends that a nationally based service be established in South Africa through an inclusive approach in partnership with other actors. The fundamental concept of the proposed helpline is for it to be the core of a national government information and support system, which uses multiple access and communication channels and is linked to and supportive of existing small-scale initiatives and other government services such as the Organising Framework for Occupations (OFO, being developed by the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations) and the Employment Services for South Africa (ESSA, developed by the Department of Labour).

The review suggests the following (Flederman 2009):

- a helpline as the core of a national system, with searchable and interfacing data (career information) systems/website/mobi-site;
- employment of new technologies to enable affordable expanded access;
- establishment of a government service able to support a national system;
- links to private, government, NGO and community career guidance services;
- support for career guidance intermediaries to expand reach;
- enhancement of the helpline service with a social marketing campaign not only marketing the service but marketing relevant educational messages, thereby expanding impact and reach.

The fourth influence on the South African career advice model is from similar existing approaches developed in the United Kingdom and New Zealand. Through the 2009 review, follow up study visits and ongoing constructive collaboration with centres such as Next Step (known at the time as Career Advice Services) in the United Kingdom and Careers New Zealand, South Africa benefited greatly and was able to develop an informed approach suitable to the South African context. The range of services offered in these centres (see Watts 2002), on which the South African model is based include a helpline, website, community outreach strategies, information
databases and multi-channel access. The importance of cell phone access in a country like South Africa was also identified through these interactions. The blueprint for the South African model came from the experiences in the United Kingdom and New Zealand, but was adapted to include an emphasis on cellphones and, importantly, also the direct link to the South African NQF. After launching the South African NQF and Career Advice Service the access channels were also expanded to include mass media such as radio and print, and social media applications such as Twitter and Facebook.

THE NQF AND CAREER ADVICE SERVICE IN SOUTH AFRICA: PROGRESS TO DATE

The national career development system evolving in South Africa is being created against a backdrop of factors. For example, approximately 2.8 million people between the ages of 18 and 24 are not in education/training, not in employment and are not disabled (Centre for Higher Education Transformation 2009). Outside of this age group, South Africans also suffer high levels of unemployment. It is essentially the over-35 age group that suffered the effects of the apartheid system, as they were students, graduates or workers when restrictive apartheid policies impacted on the education, training and career counselling programmes of the day (see Watson 2009).

The South African NQF and Career Advice Service provides career information and support to individuals, groups and intermediaries. Multi-access channels at present include a radio campaign to reach 2.3 million people in rural areas via nine radio stations, in nine African languages. These programmes are presented weekly on nine African language stations throughout the country. With an estimated listenership of 25 million people, it is estimated that about 2.3 million people listen to these programmes. Afrikaans will be added to increase the listenership and to better cover parts of the country where this is the most widely spoken language. These programmes enjoy the support of speakers such as the Minister and Deputy Minister of Higher Education and Training, from the Department of Higher Education and Training and other portfolio organisations. The programmes have been scheduled to run for 48 weeks during 2011 and will be extended depending on their popularity. Each programme follows a prepared script and a time for caller queries. Programme producers advise that they continue to receive career advice queries throughout the week, which are then referred to the national helpline.

A print media campaign complements the radio campaign by providing inserts in free newspapers throughout the country. Inserts in 11 languages run parallel to the topics of the radio campaign and make use of mobile phone technology, for example the MXit social networking platform with over 20 million users in South Africa. A series of national and regional events, including the Mandela Day Career Guidance Festival and career exhibitions around the country, take place on an annual basis.

A telephone helpline to support learners, parents, teachers, career advisors and institutions is being grown organically through the ongoing recruitment of career advisors from a variety of backgrounds, languages and cultures. Career advisors are
receiving an increasing number of phone calls, which grew from approximately 500 per month in 2010 to approximately 2 000 per month in early 2011. A total of 17 702 calls were received and captured between 19 October 2009 and 29 July 2011.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the number and different categories of calls received between October 2009 and July 2011.

![Figure 1: Calls received on the NQF and Career Advice Service Helpline 2009 to 2011](image)

The highest frequency of calls was experienced in the following areas: provider accreditation (3 366 calls, 19.0%), NQF levels (2 098 calls, 11.9%) and career development (3 113 calls, 17.6%). Overall the calls received can be grouped into at least four categories: (1) general information on the education and training system (e.g. bursaries, compliance, list of accredited providers, et cetera.), (2) information specific to SAQA (evaluation of foreign qualifications, verifications, et cetera.), (3) information specific to the NQF and quality assurance (level descriptors, NQF levels, provider accreditations, et cetera.) and (4) career counselling (including development, guidance and job preparation). Aggregating the data collected between 2009 and 2011 according to these categories shows that 81.2 per cent of calls received were mainly for information, with elements of guidance, on the education and training system, SAQA and the NQF. The remaining 17.6 per cent of calls within the period can be categorised as specifically for career development:

- general information on the education and training system: 2 535 calls (14.3%)
- information specific to SAQA: 4 496 calls (25.4%)
• information specific to the NQF and quality assurance: 7 346 calls (41.5%)
• career development: 3 113 calls (17.6%).

Facebook and Twitter sites have been established to engage the online community, enabling the wider public to make use of supporting career advice. In mid-2011, there were approximately 3.8 million South African Facebook profiles and, of these, approximately 2.3 million were between 18 and 35 years of age. The potential exists to reach a portion of the youth through this medium, which they already use, and to provide an avenue for others to participate in a public forum to help their fellow citizens. Entries on the Facebook wall are automatically delivered to helpline staff who respond via their system, delivering responses directly back to the Facebook wall. The Twitter channel is used additionally to advertise learnerships, internships and events.

A network of partner organisations or ‘intermediaries’ to help provide a network of career advisors and walk-in centres for learners in rural areas has also been established. In order to find ways to provide services that can ultimately reach the majority of South Africans, all existing national networks will need to be mapped together to provide a joint, national system of walk-in centres. The Department of Labour, Further Education and Training Colleges and other national organisations and networks with existing walk-in centres or that are capable of providing walk-in career advice services, will need to become part of the national network of career advice walk-in centres. These are independently run and financed organisations that form an integral and important part of the national system.

Career Advice Toolkits (portable libraries) and other printed materials are being produced and will be distributed to colleges and other partners during 2011 and 2012. Intermediaries or partner organisations that provide career advice services have expressed the need for materials and systems to better support career advisors. These materials need to be ‘refreshed’ each year to remain current with changes in the world of education and work. These kits are suitcases and poster tubes that are distributed to all partner (or intermediary) sites for use by career advisors. Career advisors at the sites can then use both the materials and telephone the national helpline when they need assistance in understanding a particular matter.

Both lifelong learners (the end users of the career advice service) and career advisors need to be able to access a wealth of information on career guidance, South African education, as well as the employment and self-employment environment. Much information exists on the Internet already, but must be found in a variety of websites. The Career Advice website (www.careerhelp.org.za) serves as an aggregator of information on the topic. All information that is linked on the website is available free of charge to the user (excluding the cost of accessing the Internet). To better serve the millions of citizens who access the Internet via their mobile phones, the website is being replicated into a mobi-site that is more user-friendly on small screens. In addition to the website, system development will still be needed to
provide (1) a system to show possible learning paths, (2) a learning directory to show prospective learners where they may access the programmes of their choice within an acceptable distance from their place of residence, (3) access to information on scarce and critical skills, as well as accredited providers located within the ambit of the Sector Education and Training Authorities, and (4) a system to enable learners to maintain a portfolio of achievements throughout their lives.

LOCATING CAREER DEVELOPMENT WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK

As was noted in the introduction to this article, it is not per chance that the South African career development service is located within the NQF environment. This unique situation has the potential to contribute to improved coherence in the wider system and also increase transparency of qualifications and quality assurance as citizens’ understanding and knowledge of the education and training system improves. The NQF promotes communication between education and training systems and the labour market. Its centrality in the work of the SETAs in the area of scarce and critical skills provides the logical context wherein career counselling can take place. It does so by closing the loop for a career counsellor seeking to provide a client with current career advice in terms of where the scarce skills requirements are, which qualifications are appropriate to address the scarce skills, and the appropriate lifelong learning interventions within occupations to support a sustainable career path.

The comprehensive and qualitative approach to career development, located within the context of the NQF being introduced by SAQA and DHET, is arguably an ambitious project. While there is consensus that South Africa needs a national career development service, and that the service must be tailored to career counselling needs within the South African context, there are also several areas of policy contestation. Lack of alignment between key education and training policy documents and related strategies speaks to the urgency to ensure systemic coherence to address the disjuncture dilemma between education, training, job-creation and employment opportunities. To provide a service that supports a few thousand people is to provide a ‘part-service’; the project needs to serve millions of people, which can only be accomplished through a multi-channel approach that includes the mass media such as radio and print. The extent to which the multi-channel approach, which includes the helpline, radio and print campaigns and use of modern social media, is able to reach the nation as a whole remains to be seen. There is a great and dire need amongst young, unemployed and rural citizens to be trained and to find work or to become self-employed in some way in South Africa. However, it has yet to be determined to what extent a national career advice service can impact on this area by reaching people who could not easily access assistance if the service were not in place, and by influencing more efficient decisions based on accurate information mediated via professional services.
The South African NQF makes a unique contribution within the career development discourse in its role of strengthening the coherence in the wider system and increasing transparency of qualifications and quality assurance. In particular, the NQF principles of portability and the recognition of prior learning provides an important basis for career counselling, as noted in a recent World Bank report:

The principles underpinning the NQF have important implications for the career development of individuals, particularly the principles of recognition of prior learning and portability. Guidance Counsellors need to have a good understanding of these principles, and be able to advise learners on the opportunities that these provide (Kay and Fretwell 2003, 42).

The NQF is a vehicle of communication between education and training systems and the labour market, reflected through the outcomes-based philosophy and approach to qualifications design, as well as the construct of level descriptors comprising knowledge, skills, competence and attitudes. The uniqueness of the NQF is underpinned in its referencing role for the development of workplace skills plans, which use the Organising Framework for Occupations (OFO) to reference levels of occupations in organisations. Skills development in companies is located within the OFO, which in turn is located within the NQF. Concomitant qualification requirements based on the NQF, and the identification of scarce and critical skills, are also referenced to the NQF.

The efforts to address career counselling challenges in South Africa ‘remain too insular and fail to impact significantly on the macro-systemic factors that impede individual career development in the country’ (Watson 2009, 144). To address the scale of the challenge there is a need to gather intelligence about the pockets of excellence and the scope of work that has been done by organisations such as the SETAs, and to harness all the resources available to address career counselling. The NQF is well positioned not only to provide a navigational tool for the education and employment systems, but also to impact on the factors that are impeding career development in South Africa.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This article has presented an account of a national approach to career counselling that is being introduced in South Africa through the establishment of the NQF and Career Advice Service by SAQA and the Department of Higher Education and Training. It has been shown that the approach is founded on learnings from CRIC and NQF development, along with similar experiences in the United Kingdom and New Zealand, while considering the findings of the review of the South African career guidance landscape. Importantly, the article also shows that traditional career theory, with its over-emphasis on quantitative assessment, is gradually making place for an emerging career theory that is more qualitative in its approach and more suitable to an increasingly complex world. The need to integrate complementary elements of
both traditional and emerging career theory is recognised, notably as taken up in the systems theory framework developed by Patton and McMahon (2006).

The extent to which the NQF and Career Advice Service draws on traditional career theory, emerging theory or a combination thereof is an important consideration as the Service is further developed. The review of the progress to date as presented in this article suggests that SAQA and the DHET take careful note of the following observations:

Firstly, the national approach to career development being introduced in South Africa remains overly biased towards information sharing despite the intention to do the contrary. This is evident in that fact that more than 80 per cent of the calls received on the helpline were for information dissemination purposes only. Moving away from the individualist psychological approach (dominant in traditional career theory) towards a more collectivist sociological approach (considered in emerging career theory) will require careful reflection on the extent to which the current model is achieving its objectives. While the multi-channel approach will undoubtedly be instrumental in this regard, there is a pressing need to also interrogate the role of career counsellors in order to create conducive conditions for collaborative relationships with clients to develop. At present it does not seem to be the case as the hallmarks of a ‘transition model’ are becoming more prevalent. That is despite the fact that the NQF and Career Advice Service has been significantly influenced by the multi-channel models developed in the United Kingdom and New Zealand, as well as the CRIC model developed in the 1970s which was at the centre of the alternative approaches to information transmission. More detailed research into the training and role of career counsellors, support to users to process information so that it is internalised, as well as the specific nature of counselling being offered should be undertaken to mitigate this very real risk.

Secondly, there is much to be gained from a careful consideration of the systems theory framework, and more specifically, the extent to which the model underlying the NQF and Career Advice Service is located within this career development theory. System theory has the potential to provide an important and necessary theoretical foundation for the model being proposed. It is imperative that this foundation be made more explicit and accessible to the architects and stakeholders of the Centre, including also the career counsellors. In this regard investigation into the extent to which the service is challenging the neo-liberal economic policy of the country which privileges the middle classes is also necessary. Similarly, there is a need to locate the theoretical framework within the broader context of lifelong learning, and to gather data on the demographic profile of users and their concerns.

Thirdly, and this relates to the first point, the use of multi-channels is not necessarily sufficient to ensure a ‘qualitative’ approach. Care must be taken to ensure the involvement of active clients in an interactive and holistic approach that is flexible and adaptive. The significance of technology that enables career development outreach and the implications of social media to raise further questions about new approaches to career development in the future should also be considered.
The challenges of the digital divide should also not be underestimated in South Africa which is a country that in the past has struggled to integrate ICT into the delivery of various types of services. Specific research is necessary to determine the effectiveness of the different channels. Reaching the hard-to-reach remains a significant challenge in a developing country such as South Africa even when following a qualitative approach that attempts to enable broad access to career services, and even when this approach utilises multi-access channels and affordable technologies.

Fourthly, the assumption must not be made that a new system of qualifications for the profession of career guidance will necessarily lead to the widening of access to clients of the services. While the development of relevant qualifications for, and increased professionalisation of career counsellors is necessary, this cannot be directly attributed to widening of access. Qualifications at different levels, and within a structured pathway, do however provide the opportunity for different levels of counsellors to be recognised beyond the traditional postgraduate-level clinician. The development of a national network of career counsellors is also important in this regard and more information on the process and strategy should be made available to the relevant stakeholders.

Lastly, it is critical to consider the sustainability of the national approach being introduced. While the association of the career counselling service with the NQF, SAQA and the DHET has significant potential as discussed in this article, there are also potential unintended consequences that may impact on sustainability. A critique of the NQF is that it is too technical, bureaucratic and difficult to understand. The service has to challenge this perception and impact on the NQF itself to ensure that it is more accessible to the ordinary person. On a governance level SAQA risks being over-burdened by the challenge of establishing the Centre, resulting in mission drift and inability to perform its key mandate, namely the development and implementation of the NQF. In this regard SAQA’s task is significant and it will be disingenuous to assume that this is not the case. Strong centralisation through the direct intervention of government in the area of career development could also stymie healthy competition in the sector and result in less funding being available to support existing and new developments in the private and NGO sectors. While learning from the first world, South Africa has to significantly shift emphasis to address demographic realities. How to do this and remain effective is a serious challenge. The possibilities for career counselling in the context of high unemployment in South Africa is another vital feature that requires further interrogation by SAQA and the DHET. In this regard the work of Watts (2002) offers important insights.

The NQF and Career Advice Service in South Africa is the first time a middle-income developing country is innovative in using cutting edge technology to provide career development services on a national scale and as a national system. This fledgling national career advice service that is based on respect for the person as a unique individual and lifelong learner, and that is also able to reach the masses, will undoubtedly go a long way to addressing the challenges in South Africa. While the alignment of the approach with the emerging international shift towards qualitative
approaches in career counselling is apparent, the unique association with the South African NQF stands out as a distinguishing factor with significant potential that needs to be further exploited.

NOTES
1 We acknowledge the detailed comments and inputs provided by Patricia Flederman and external reviewers on earlier drafts of the article. We do, however, take full responsibility for any errors and omissions. The opinions expressed are our own and do not necessarily reflect SAQA policy.
2 Designated groups in South Africa are defined in the Employment Equity Act (Act 55 of 1998) as black people, women and people with disabilities.
3 The actual number of calls received may be higher as very short calls have not always been captured on the existing data collection system. An integrated system is currently being developed to address this problem.

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