CHAPTER 5: SECOND CYCLE SUMMARY AND FINDINGS

Introduction

This final chapter summarises and comments on the baseline findings presented in Chapter 4 and discusses their implications for current NQF debates, in particular the issues identified in Chapter 3. Chapter 5 also identifies future research and development implications.

Summary of baseline findings

As was explained in Chapter 1 of the Report, the 17 Impact Indicators are organised into four sets, each focusing on different overarching aspects of NQF implementation. The following table is a summary of the baseline findings per Set of Impact Indicators.

		Level of impact			
		HP	M	MM	N
Set 1: The extent to which qualifications address the education and training needs of learners and South African society					
1	Number of qualifications		M		
2	Effectiveness of qualification design			MM	
3	Portability of qualifications			MM	
4	Relevance of qualifications		M		
5	Qualifications uptake and achievement			MM	
6	Integrative approach			MM	
Set 2: The extent to which the delivery of learning programmes addresses the education and training needs of learners and South African society					
7	Equity of access		M		
8	Redress practices			MM	
9	Nature of learning programmes	HP			
10	Quality of learning and teaching		M		
11	Assessment practices		M		
12	Career and learning pathing		M		
Set 3: The extent to which quality assurance arrangements enhance the effectiveness of education and training					
13	Number of registered assessors and moderators			MM	
14	Number of accredited providers			MM	
15	Quality assurance practices			MM	
Set 4: The extent to which the NQF has had a wider social, economic and political impact in building a lifelong learning culture					
16	Organisational, economic and societal benefits	HP			
17	Contribution to other national strategies	HP			

Table 22: Baseline findings per Impact Indicator Set

In the following sections the findings are summarised according to levels of impact.

High positive impact baseline findings

The NQF was perceived to have had a high positive impact in the following areas:

- Nature of learning programmes (#9)
- Organisational, economic and societal benefits (#16)
- Contribution to other national strategies (#17)

The positive impact of the NQF on the nature of learning programmes was a marked and perhaps surprising finding. The NQF has led to a major redesign of courses and while there were some complaints about cumbersome processes, there was widespread agreement that NQF principles, in particular an outcomes-based approach, had had a positive impact on learning programmes. This view stemmed partly from the belief that certification had increased learner motivation. Other factors included a greater emphasis on application of knowledge and skills, clarity of learning objectives, enhanced learner autonomy, and a strengthening of quality assurance of programmes.

Clearly, some respondents had concerns about the onerous nature of the associated processes but this does not detract from the overall finding that learning programmes have markedly improved since the inception of the NQF. This is corroborated by comments made under Indicator 16, which were also highly positive.

There was strong evidence of the organisational and societal benefits of the NQF. There were fewer comments on the economic benefits; people clearly believed that there had been benefits for skills development in South Africa but understandably few were suggesting that this had yet worked through to economic benefits. Respondents pointed to a number of ways in which the NQF was making an impact, including employee empowerment, enhanced self esteem for learners, more awareness of learning opportunities, improved responsiveness on the part of providers, and clearer learning pathways. NQF qualifications were also said to be becoming an important factor in recruitment.

Similarly, respondents believed strongly that the NQF was contributing to other national strategies. Examples they gave included reducing illiteracy, upskilling the labour force, enabling communities to take control of their socio-economic situation, and improving HIV/AIDS awareness. While reaction was highly positive, it seems possible that respondents were giving a strong endorsement to the principles and values of the NQF rather than necessarily arguing that these strategies were yet fully operational. However, the key point is that the NQF strategy is seen to be well aligned with, and supportive of, these other key national policies and strategies.

Moderate impact baseline findings

The implementation of the NQF was perceived to have had a moderate positive impact in the following areas:

- Number of qualifications (#1)
- Relevance of qualifications (#4)
- Equity of access (#7)
- Quality of learning and teaching (#10)
- Assessment practices (#11)
- Career and learning pathing (#12)

Some NQF qualifications, especially workplace qualifications, were seen to be very relevant to employment needs, particularly because of their practical emphasis. Learnerships and skills programmes were thought to be particularly relevant, although some respondents thought that there was still a need to improve the scope and level of outcomes in these programmes. There was also an acknowledgement of the increased availability and relevance of non-traditional qualifications. Some university qualifications, school qualifications and, in particular teacher education qualifications, were frequently criticised for lack of relevance. By this was meant lack of relevance to the world of work.

There was a strong consensus that access to education is open to all previously excluded groups, people with disabilities, women, learners of all ages, and all population groups. These beliefs were backed up by practical examples, except for some reason in respect of gender. However, the key issue (in the minds of respondents) in respect of access is RPL. In Cycle 1, the indicative evidence was that while RPL was seen as very important, there was frustration about the lack of progress. In this cycle, there was some encouraging evidence of developments in actual practices, notably in technikons and universities. On the other hand, there is still a widespread belief that RPL is too complex and costly. The whole area of access to education is one which might benefit from more in-depth research (see below).

The quality of learning and teaching was thought to have improved. Respondents believed that more attention was paid to the needs of learners. Many pointed to an increased emphasis on professional development for educators and the establishment of units for academic development or quality of learning. Others believed that more needed to be done in teacher development. Examples were given by respondents of improvements in learner support, although again there were some dissenting voices.

Respondents clearly believed that assessment practices had improved. This was perhaps an unexpected finding, but people seem to be distinguishing between the *process* of assessment reform, which many believe to be cumbersome and over-detailed, and the *outcomes* of assessment reform, which are viewed much more positively. It was said that assessment was taken more seriously, and there was increased use of assignments and case studies, and more continuous assessment. There were also better links with workplace learning. Assessment could be linked into workplace quality control and appraisal systems. On the other hand, the evidence on standards was mixed. Some said there was more consistency while others were concerned about the scope for subjectivity or even fraud. Also, the concerns about bureaucracy and workload remain. While some felt that it was a matter of getting used to the new system, others were more pessimistic.

While the overall responses on career and learning pathing were mixed, there was some evidence that progression routes were becoming clearer. There were perhaps enough reports of good practice to suggest that there has been some positive change in the years since the introduction of the NQF (although some argued that such changes were not directly attributable to the NQF). This is another area that would benefit from further research.

Minimal/mixed impact baseline findings

The NQF was found to have had a minimal or mixed impact in the following areas:

- Effectiveness of qualification design (#2)
- Portability of qualifications (#3)
- Qualifications uptake and achievement (#5)
- Integrative approach (#6)
- Redress practices (#8)
- Number of registered assessors and moderators (#13)
- Number of accredited providers (#14)
- Quality assurance practices (#15)

Respondents generally found it difficult to focus on issues of qualifications design. There were some comments on the value of combining theory and practice and some reactions on specific issues such as the quality of the matric certificate and the relative merits of unit-standard based and non-unit standard based qualifications. However, in the analysis of NQF registered qualifications of the three sectors, Physical Planning and Construction, Mining and Minerals and Hospitality, Travel, Tourism and Gaming, this indicator was useful in determining the extent to which qualifications design supports the broader principles of the NQF. The following principles and foci became evident:

- Career mapping/career pathways
- Improved access through flexible entry requirements and RPL
- The portability and transfer of credits, particularly within the sector, but also across sectors
- Articulation of qualifications with each other

- Standardisation of qualifications
- The integration of theory and practice
- Responsiveness and relevance to workplaces
- Employability, entrepreneurship and social transformation

There is still a sense that the NQF is not yet fully operational because of a number of inter-related problems. The level of uptake and achievement is still low, partly because it takes time for learners to complete programmes leading to qualifications. One would expect numbers to increase significantly by Cycle 3. However, uptake is also affected by the slow progress in registration of assessors and moderators and accreditation of providers.

These problems in turn are attributed by the majority of respondents to deficiencies in the quality assurance system. There is little doubt that this is the area with the most significant issues for the NQF to address. About two thirds of respondents considered quality assurance to be overly bureaucratic, causing many administrative problems. It is interesting to note, however (and there is a parallel here with assessment practices) that while there are deep concerns about *processes*, there is some satisfaction with quality assurance *outcomes.* There is strong support for the idea of quality standards and a belief that quality assurance is improving.

The key problems affecting quality assurance are said to be:

- Lack of progress with Memoranda of Understanding
- Legislative anomalies, giving rise to dual accreditation
- Lack of trust
- Overlapping responsibilities of ETQAs
- 'Too much power' for CHE
- DoE's 'lack of understanding of non-formal education'
- Quality assurance mechanisms being set up for the sake of compliance rather than to improve quality
- Uncertainty about registration with the DoE

These problems are not new. Many have been on record since the report of the Study Team. Interestingly, the problems on which respondents focus are strategic rather than operational. They relate to ongoing problems of governance of the NQF. South Africa is far from being unique internationally in having developed assessment or quality assurance processes that practitioners find to be too complex. It may be unique in the length of time such issues have been left unresolved.

Portability of qualifications continues to be seen as problematic. Respondents identified two key problems:

- Beliefs that are held about the relative quality of particular institutions or education/training sectors
- Institutional practices such as limited communication, the drive for profit and differences in syllabi

It is also thought that there has been little progress on Redress. This is largely attributable to the lack of impact of RPL. Under the Equity of Access Indicator, a moderately encouraging position was presented because learners are starting to be able to obtain NQF credits through RPL. However, redress requires that learners are then able to 'cash in' their credits and most respondents believe that this is not yet happening. It is said that the only route into further and higher education is through the matric certificate or other formal entry requirement.

This lack of progress on Portability and Redress is perhaps not surprising. International evidence and expert commentary has consistently pointed to the need to consider 'institutional (as well as intrinsic) logic' and to seek to develop 'communities of trust'. It is not enough to develop systems that allow for progression and credit transfer and permit the recognition of prior learning. It is also necessary for practitioner values and institutional practices to be aligned with these goals.

The findings on Integrative Approach echo those on Portability and Redress. Moving between academic and vocational qualifications remains difficult; there is no parity of esteem for vocational education; and co-operation between formal education and the world of work and training remains limited. There were positive responses to some questions under this Indicator but this seems largely to reflect support for the *aspiration* to a unified system rather than an identification of significant progress in reality.

Negative impact baseline findings

No Impact Indicators were rated negative.

Implications of the baseline findings for current debates and future research

French (2004) in his critique of the Chairperson's Lecture characterised the NQF Impact Study methodology as based on 'market opinion and self-report questionnaire surveys'. He went on to argue:

> Professor Jansen … implicitly recommends some interesting alternatives. At the heart of his recommendation is the use of studies of how the NQF is being implemented, or evaded, in terms of the practices, institutional arrangements and individual responses. For example: How have curricula been changing, and to what extent is the change due to the NQF? How is assessment being managed? How have previously marginalised learners been taken up in education and training in ways that recognise and valorise new knowledge? In what ways are different forms of knowledge being allowed to flow together into qualifications? Such questions are implicit in the sets of indicators, but it may be that cumulative, persuasive, in-depth narratives of the multiple, varied real-life responses to the transformative challenge of the NQF, backed by national, regional and sectoral statistics, would be more telling than indicators?

There is much force in this argument. Indicators are no more and no less than the name implies. They provide an *indication* of the main trends in the system and can offer a 'big picture' view over time. They do not provide the 'fine grain' of practice or point to solutions except in the most general terms. However, indicators can indicate where more research might be valuable. It is not necessary to choose between having an Impact Study and the type of research to which French refers. Both are needed. However, there are clear indications that practice is changing, and that there is great awareness for the need to change.

More in-depth research is required in respect of some Indicators, particularly those where the detail of institutional practice and the quality of the learners' experience needs to be understood more clearly. There are some inter-related areas where, in the view of the project team, further research would be particularly valuable.

Access

How are issues of access perceived by people from previously excluded groups? Do they share the view that access is more open? What institutional practices encourage or discourage access?

Recognition of Prior Learning

What are the characteristics of good practice in the emerging RPL system? What are the key barriers to effective implementation? How easy or difficult is it for learners to transfer RPL credits to new programmes?

Career and learning pathing

How clear are progression routes to learners? How important an issue is it for them? What needs to be done to meet learner needs better?

The results of the Impact Study suggest that there are four key areas for development (possibly with some associated research):

1. Simplification of assessment

The perceived complexity of assessment processes remains a significant issue. Indeed, had it not been for the negative comments about processes, Assessment Practices would have been rated High Positive. Consideration could be given to setting up a Review of Assessment to determine the scope for simplification.

2. Clarification and simplification of responsibilities for Quality Assurance

Concerns about quality assurance focus on overlapping responsibilities or uncertainty about responsibilities. The Impact Study findings suggest that there is an urgent need to clarify and simplify responsibilities.

3. Development of Communities of Trust

This question lies at the heart of the lack of progress towards an Integrative Approach, Portability of Qualifications, and Redress. Consideration could be given to establishing a national programme that facilitated local consortia of providers from different sectors of education/training to work together to establish effective access and progression routes and to build mutual understanding and trust.

4. Clarification of the integrative intentions of the NQF

Unlike the other development areas, which are concerned with quite practical matters, this issue is still at a conceptual level. It is suggested, however, that it is of considerable symbolic importance and that there is a need to clarify and come to a common understanding of the notion of an integrative approach. The question of what 'integration' really means has been with the NQF since its inception and remains a barrier to achieving a consensus on the direction the NQF should take. The typology of NQFs presented in Chapter 3, drawing on the work of international experts, may offer part of the basis for debating and resolving this question.

Conclusion

The purpose of Cycle 2 of the NQF Impact Study was to *establish a baseline against which to measure the progress of the NQF*. The research process, developed around a suite of 17 Impact Indicators, involved numerous interviews and focus groups with stakeholders and partners. An independent national survey was also undertaken to triangulate findings. The findings were categorised according to the Impact Indicators after which the impact of each was determined using a continuum of levels ranging from high positive, moderate, minimal/mixed to negative: three Impact Indicators were rated as high positive, six as moderate, eight as minimal/mixed and none as negative.

This baseline report presents the second step by SAQA towards achieving the effective measurement of the impact of the NQF on the South African education and training system. With the release of this report in 2005, the NQF Impact Study stands as a pioneering study, susceptible to criticism, but also open to intellectual scrutiny and public debate. The NQF Impact Study presents NQF implementers, within and beyond South Africa, with empirical data that can be used to improve NQF development and implementation in the years to come.