

COMMUNIQUÉ 5 OF 2026

To:	All Higher Education Institutions, Higher Education Stakeholders and Role-Players in Higher Education, all Interested Persons
Subject:	Release of the Revised Higher Education Qualifications Sub-framework

Introduction

In its capacity as the quality council for higher education, the Council on Higher Education (CHE) is pleased to announce the release of the Revised Higher Education Qualifications Sub-framework (HEQSF) published under Gazette No. 54941 of 3 July 2026. The section of the Gazette containing the revised HEQSF accompanies this communiqué. The full Gazette can be downloaded at https://che.ac.za/sites/default/files/inline-files/3%20July%202026_Government%20Gazette_Revised%20HEQSF%20section.pdf

The HEQSF is the sole policy framework that defines the parameters for higher education qualifications within the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). It establishes the qualification types, qualification descriptors, qualification design principles, articulation pathways, and minimum requirements applicable to qualifications offered by higher education institutions in South Africa. The HEQSF is therefore relevant to all higher education providers, professional bodies whose higher education designations are linked to higher education qualifications, industry, employers, and other stakeholders.

1. Rationale for the Review

The review of the HEQSF was necessitated by significant developments in the legislative and policy environment of the NQF since the publication of the current HEQSF in 2013. These developments include the promulgation and revision of national policies relating to articulation, the recognition of prior learning (RPL), credit accumulation and transfer (CAT), and the internationalisation of higher education, among others.



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The review was further informed by feedback received from higher education institutions and other stakeholders following the HEQSF alignment process. Stakeholders identified areas of the framework that required greater clarity to support consistent interpretation and implementation. Through its own implementation and quality assurance processes, the CHE likewise identified opportunities to clarify certain aspects of the HEQSF and to strengthen ease of implementation.

The review has been shaped by extensive consultation and engagement with stakeholders across the higher education sector on issues critical to its effective implementation and management. The process was further informed by benchmarking against developments in qualifications frameworks within the Southern African Development Community (SADC), across the African continent, and internationally, with the aim of strengthening the comparability, responsiveness, and international recognition of South African higher education qualifications.

2. Changes in the Revised HEQSF

The Revised HEQSF retains the nine qualification types contained in the 2013 HEQSF while providing greater clarity on key concepts, principles and implementation practices. It includes additional guidance and examples, where appropriate, to promote consistent interpretation and implementation across higher education institutions. The principal revisions are summarised below:

2.1. Stronger alignment with the National Qualifications Framework: The Revised HEQSF explicitly positions the HEQSF within the broader National Qualifications Framework (NQF) architecture and demonstrates how it operationalises the objectives of the NQF. Compared with the 2013 HEQSF, it provides stronger articulation with the other NQF sub-frameworks. The Revised HEQSF includes enhanced support for articulation, learner mobility, progression, RPL, CAT, flexible learning pathways and lifelong learning.

2.2. Greater clarity on qualification purposes and the introduction of qualification sub-

types: The Revised HEQSF retains the distinction between general, professional and vocational qualifications while providing clearer guidance on the purpose and characteristics of each. It also introduces qualification sub-types and refines routes as follows:

2.2.1. The Diploma is clarified as a vocational qualification with a focus on Work-Integrated Learning (WIL).

2.2.2. A new 'general' sub-type of the Higher Certificate is introduced as an access qualification.

2.2.3. The Advanced Certificate is reclassified as a vocational qualification.

2.2.4. The Postgraduate Diploma is divided into 'general' and 'professional' sub-types.

2.2.5. Three sub-types are provided for the Master's degree, namely general (research), general (coursework), and professional.

2.2.6. Similarly, three sub-types are provided for the Doctoral degree, namely general (research), general (coursework and research), and professional.

2.3. Clearer and more coherent qualification architecture to improve consistency in qualification design and enhance comparability across the higher education system:

The Revised HEQSF provides greater clarity on qualification descriptors and on the nested approach to the design of qualification standards and qualifications.

2.4. Clarity of naming conventions: The Revised HEQSF flags concerns regarding the proliferation of qualifications. It provides greater clarity on the use of designators and qualifiers as one means of addressing this concern. The number of qualifiers that may be used in a single qualification is capped. The use of elective streams is also

clarified as a further mechanism to stem proliferation, and the relationship between designators, qualifiers, and the use of Classification of Educational Subject Matter (CESM) codes is clarified.

2.5. The Revised HEQSF provides for greater flexibility and learner mobility through enhanced articulation, CAT, RPL, micro-credentials, and early-exit qualifications:

2.5.1. The Revised HEQSF explicitly prohibits dead-end qualifications and focuses on intentional articulation and articulation by design.

2.5.2. Articulation between the HEQSF and the other sub-frameworks is clarified, and higher education institutions are encouraged to use RPL to widen access to higher education.

2.5.3. The 10% limit for admission through RPL is not included in the Revised HEQSF. Consideration of measures to strengthen the quality assurance of RPL will be addressed in the revision of the CHE Policy on RPL, as well as in the Revised HEQSF Implementation Guide currently under development.

2.5.4. The system of CAT is clarified in detail, including the range of cases to which CAT may apply. These include instances where a student transfers from one qualification into a related qualification within the same institution, or transfers to another institution into the same or a related qualification. Other provisions pertinent to CAT included are:

2.5.4.1. Credit transfer caps are clarified; however, provision is made, in specific circumstances, for the relaxation of the 50% cap on CAT.

2.5.4.2. Institutional responsibilities for the development and implementation of a CAT policy are clarified, as is the responsibility to provide clarity on the possibilities for CAT within learning programmes and their associated qualifications.

2.5.4.3. The Revised HEQSF allows for credits earned through learning for 'non-degree purposes', short learning programmes, and micro-credentials to be transferred towards qualifications.

2.5.4.4. It allows, in special circumstances and on application, for the conferment of early-exit qualifications.

2.5.4.5. The Revised HEQSF makes provision for collaborative offerings between institutions. In line with the Policy Framework for the Internationalisation of Higher Education in South Africa (DHET, 2019), it permits collaborative qualifications that are developed and offered jointly by institutions in South Africa and/or with partner institutions in other countries.

2.5.5. The use, application and limits of RPL application in the context of the HEQSF are clarified. Institutional responsibility to ensure adequate capacity to apply RPL effectively is outlined. Major provisions related to RPL included are:

2.5.5.1. Award of HEQSF qualifications purely on the basis of RPL remains prohibited.

2.5.5.2. The Revised HEQSF acknowledges that RPL may not be applicable uniformly across fields and disciplines and advocates engagement with disciplinary experts on RPL concerns. It also clearly discourages unjustifiable perpetuation and legitimisation of barriers to RPL.

2.5.5.3. It allows for award of up to 50% of credits required towards a qualification on the basis of RPL. This will require closer attention to RPL assessment and quality assurance of RPL processes. More guidance will be provided in the Revised RPL Policy and the Implementation Manual.

2.6. The HEQSF clarifies the inclusion of Work Integrated Learning (WIL) in HEQSF qualifications:

2.6.1. The revised HEQSF provides clarity on and underscores the importance ensuring that WIL is appropriate for the nature and purpose of the qualification.

2.6.2. Where WIL takes the form of work-place-based learning, the Revised HEQSF stipulates that it must be appropriately structured, properly supervised and assessed.

2.6.3. The responsibility of institutions for securing WIL placements for students is clarified.

2.7. The 240-credit Diploma is discontinued. The last date of first-time enrolment into existing 240-credit diplomas is 31 December 2027.

3. Implementation arrangements

3.1. The Revised HEQSF became effective on publication in the Government Gazette No. 54941 on 03 July 2026. However, some of the policies that support implementation of the Revised HEQSF are still in the process of revision.

3.2. The implication of this is that implementation of some of the provisions in the revised HEQSF will, of necessity be phased as arrangements to support implementation are finalised.

3.3. All programmes and qualifications that form part of institutional HEQSF-records remain valid.

3.4. Institutions are urged to engage directly with the M-HEQSF sub-programme through mheqsf@che.ac.za and copying Dlamini.p@che.ac.za on their HEQSF-aligned records as necessary to ensure records continue to be aligned.

3.5. Institutions that have 240-credit diplomas and who wish to continue offering the Level 6 Diploma will need to submit new accreditation applications for replacement 360-credit diplomas.

3.6. As stated earlier, some aspects of the Revised HEQSF require reconsideration and review of current policy and practice. These include:

3.6.1. Currently, HEQSF policy does not allow for any attributes of the NQF to be used for Short Learning Programmes (SLPs) whilst the Revised HEQSF allows for

credits to be awarded on the basis of learning from SLPs and micro-credentials.

- 3.6.2.** Credit-bearing SLPs or Microcredentials will need to be recommended by the CHE to SAQA for registration on the NQF, and the recommendation will be based on a level of quality assurance undertaken by the CHE.

Implementation of the above provisions will thus require the CHE to put quality assurance processes in place for SLPs and micro-credentials that are aligned with the aspirations of the Quality Assurance Framework (QAF). Award of credits against learning earned from micro-credentials will also require a policy framework at national and possibly sectoral level in addition to CHE quality assurance considerations. Institutions are thus required to wait for these processes to be completed before any credits can be awarded for SLPs or Micro-credentials.

- 3.6.3.** All policies and guidelines that support implementation of the HEQSF including Policies on RPL, CAT, Articulation and award and certification will need to be reviewed and updated to align with the Revised HEQSF. Stakeholder engagements and other processes towards this are in process.

- 3.6.4.** A Handbook to support implementation of the HEQSF is also being prepared for consideration and approval by the HEQC later this year.

- 3.6.5.** In the interim, a range of stakeholder workshops and webinars will be conducted for different stakeholder groups. Communication on these will be disseminated to the sector in due course.



Dr Whitfield Green

Chief Executive Officer

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