



# Towards a micro-credential country model for South Africa

Recognition of non-formal and informal skills  
for young people in Eastern and Southern Africa  
through the innovation of micro-credentials





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## Acronyms

<b>CESM</b>	Classification of Educational Subject Matter	<b>OEM</b>	Original Equipment Manufacturers
<b>CHE</b>	Council on Higher Education	<b>PYEI</b>	Presidential Youth Employment Intervention
<b>CV</b>	Curriculum Vitae	<b>QC</b>	Quality Council
<b>DHET</b>	Department of Higher Education and Training, South Africa	<b>QCTO</b>	Quality Council for Trades & Occupations
<b>DUCT</b>	Duzi-uMngeni Conservation Trust	<b>RPL</b>	Recognition of Prior Learning
<b>ECD</b>	Early Childhood Development	<b>SACNASP</b>	South African Council for Natural Scientific Professions
<b>EPWP</b>	Expanded Public Works Programme	<b>SADC</b>	Southern African Development Community
<b>GFETQSF</b>	General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-Framework	<b>SADCQF</b>	Southern African Development Community Regional Qualifications Framework
<b>HEI</b>	Higher Education Institutions	<b>SAQA</b>	South African Qualifications Authority
<b>HEQSF</b>	Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework	<b>SDG</b>	Sustainable Development Goal
<b>ICT</b>	Information Communication Technology	<b>SETA</b>	Sector Education and Training Authority
<b>ILO</b>	International Labour Organisation	<b>UKZN</b>	University of KwaZulu Natal
<b>LMS</b>	Learning Management System	<b>UMALUSI</b>	Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training
<b>MOOC</b>	Massive Open Online Courses	<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund
<b>NAMB</b>	National Artisan Moderation Body	<b>WRC</b>	Water Research Commission
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organization	<b>YES</b>	Youth Employment Service
<b>NPMN</b>	National Pathways Management Network		
<b>NQF</b>	National Qualifications Framework		





## Section 1

# Introduction



This research investigates current micro-credential projects and initiatives in the case study countries to formulate and design three country relevant micro-credential model based on practice-focused, actionable, scalable evidence to increase recognition of non-formal/informal skills development opportunities to facilitate transitions or unemployed youth into the labour market.

This research draws on the published terms of reference (ToR) and has been further refined through an inception workshop held with UNICEF country teams and the Nairobi office on 25 April 2023. The research is limited to Burundi, South Africa, and Uganda, and is inspired by an earlier global study on micro-credentials commissioned by the ILO and UNICEF which is due for public release in 2024.

In particular, the research explores how perspectives, expectations, and awareness of micro-credentials among young people, employers (labour demand), and labour market institutions are addressed through the proposed country micro-credential offerings by education and training providers (labour supply). It will address the potential challenges and opportunities associated with micro-credentials, with specific regional and country-level examples to the extent possible, particularly in the context of high youth unemployment in low- and middle-income contexts.

Specifically, this study:

1. **Reviews existing characterizations of micro-credentials** and develops working country context relevant models.
2. **Researches existing country micro-credential projects** to identify challenges, opportunities and employment entry points targeted by micro-credentials and facilitate labour market transitions, especially from the informal to the formal economy, as well as access to decent work opportunities for marginalised young people.

3. **Investigates the extent to which micro-credentials are recognized and valued**

by country employers, informal workers, and jobseekers, and their efficacy in facilitating young people's transitions into and within the labour market.

4. **Addresses how transferable skills credentialing can be implemented**

to attract employer demand, which gives preference towards technical skills that are specific to a particular job role, occupation, company, or industry.

Building on the outcomes of the global UNICEF-ILO study, this research on existing country micro-credential projects will provide context-relevant learnings and intelligence to inform, shape and position micro-credentials in each ecosystem. The working country models may be used internationally as points of reference for future research and debates, including in the ILO and UNICEF. An important purpose of this research is to produce accessible outputs that are not overly dense research reports. The research team will work closely with UNICEF to monitor these outputs, and where necessary the longer denser versions will be used as a basis for shorter and more accessible versions that will be released in the public domain.



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## Section 2

# State Of Micro-Credentials In South Africa





## Overview

While the use of micro-credentials across the world has been slow and uneven, that is especially the case across Southern Africa, where policy oversight is only a few years old, public awareness is low, the extent of provision is scarcely known, and access is often difficult and marked by inequalities. Nevertheless, learners and providers, as well as employees and employers, are facing similar changes and challenges as the rest of the world. Regional policymakers are clear that under the circumstances a coordinated and holistic approach to the phenomenon of micro-credentials is necessary, particularly to promote good practice and mitigate risks.

The 2014 Addis Convention (Revised Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas, Degrees, and Other Academic Qualifications in Higher Education in African States), that was effective on 15 December 2019 and has since been ratified by South Africa and Mauritius is relevant here. The Convention establishes a legal framework for the fair and transparent recognition of higher education qualifications in the African region to facilitate mobility and inter-university cooperation. It supports academic mobility and exchange among African states and strengthens trust in the quality enhancement of institutions and systems, while providing a pivotal network for advancing the Sustainable Development Goals' targets for equitable access in the region. Not least, it facilitates the recognition of qualifications, prior learning and study periods earned remotely, and promotes the recognition of migrants' and refugees' qualifications, even in cases where documentary evidence is lacking.

Recent Southern African policy development initiatives are also pertinent. At the regional level, a Southern African Development Community (SADC) review of the state of implementation of the Southern African Development Community Regional Qualifications Framework (SADCQF) and of national qualifications frameworks in SADC countries, included a survey which received

responses from eight-member countries. It found that members acknowledged the growing importance of micro-credentials, and emphasised "the need for clear understanding, analysis, and appreciation of what micro-credentials are and how they can link to the SADCQF" (SADC, 2022, p. 46). On this basis it recommended that the SADC, in cooperation with other qualifications authorities and quality assurance agencies across Africa "could seize the opportunity to engage in a structured dialogue about a common African concept and guidelines on micro-credentials" (SADC, 2022, p. 9).

In South Africa, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET 2022) has issued a discussion paper on the recognition of learning and micro-credentials. The Council on Higher Education (CHE 2022) has just completed a thorough study to inform the review of the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) which regulates all higher education qualifications in the country. In the meantime, the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA 2022), which is the custodian of the South African National Qualifications Framework, has produced its own discussion document on the 'recognition of small units of credit and non-credit bearing learning programmes'.

In its 2022 discussion paper, **the DHET pointed to the need to recognise learning taking place not only through formal qualifications but also non-formally and informally, such as: in industry and the world of work; in professional fields; through online and international studies; through MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), self-directed learning and open educational resources; and through the development of soft and transversal skills.** The CHE's study echoed this, calling for the adoption of an enabling approach to promote flexibility around the recognition of, and greater articulation between, informal, non-formal and formal learning, including micro-credentials (CHE, 2022, p. 164).



Such recognition of learning is critically important to the future of higher education both nationally and regionally. Among many intended outcomes, **it promotes learning targeted competencies and skills, provides opportunities to unemployed and disadvantaged individuals, assists those in employment to maintain their skills and access further studies, increases institutional responsiveness to changing socio-economic needs while potentially generating additional income, responds to skills gaps and boosts job creation amongst the youth as well as adults, and makes learning more learner-centred, flexible and accessible for everyone** (CHE, 2022; DHET, 2022; SAQA, 2022).

The DHET warned, however, that despite growing demand for shorter and more flexible forms of learning and interest in micro-credentials, all countries were grappling with the challenge of integrating these in or alongside existing qualification frameworks. DHET noted that ‘the lack of an agreed definition and a global taxonomy’ of micro-credentials can be confusing, that stakeholder engagement and buy-in is essential, and that engagement with industry and employers should take place (DHET, 2022, p. 1-2). Both the CHE and SAQA expressed concern that the commodification or commercialisation of teaching

and learning might have harmful effects on its quality, as well as impinging on academic freedom, while potentially threatening the cohesion of qualifications and having a negative impact on disadvantaged or marginalised groups (CHE, 2022; SAQA, 2022).

Accordingly, the DHET recommended that key stakeholders, including itself, SAQA, the CHE, and the other two Quality Councils which oversee the general and further education sector, and occupational sector, respectively – the Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training (UMALUSI), and the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) – jointly formalise a position on recognising learning in a lifelong learning context, and develop a ‘Roadmap of Actions’ pertaining to the imperative for micro-credentials in the South African context and beyond. In conjunction with this, the CHE study recommended that options for establishing a permanent infrastructure for evaluating potentially credit-worthy non-formal learning offerings and for digital credentialing of formal learning be investigated (CHE, 2022, p. 97). Similarly, SAQA sees South Africa as moving toward a new or revised qualifications framework ‘that attempts to recognise a wider variety of types of learning’ and proposes the development of ‘enabling policies and guidelines’ (SAQA, 2022, p. 15).



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## Navigating the South African qualifications system

The South African Qualifications Authority is the overarching body in South Africa that is responsible for creating and maintaining the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), including the registration of qualifications on the NQF. The NQF is a comprehensive system that organises and recognises qualifications, ensuring that they are nationally and internationally comparable.

The NQF is primarily concerned with formal learning. The option of the recognition of prior learning (RPL) is made available for instances where non-formal or informal learning must be recognised in the formal system. The NQF does not include non-formal learning, such as short courses, but it does allow for part-qualifications with an occupational orientation (early discussions on the inclusion of micro-credentials are also underway).

The NQF is structured according to the following core elements:

- ▶ **Learning outcomes:** in line with international trends, all qualifications registered on the NQF are based on learning outcomes, defined by SAQA as ‘the contextually demonstrated end-products of specific learning processes, which include knowledge, skills and values’.
- ▶ **Levels (10):** organise learning achievements in ascending order from less to more complex based on an agreed set of level descriptors.
- ▶ **Categories of applied competence (10):** scope of knowledge; knowledge literacy; method and procedure; problem solving; ethics and professional practice; accessing, processing, and managing information; producing and communicating of information; context and systems; management of learning; and accountability.
- ▶ **Organising fields (12):** from Agriculture and Nature Conservation to Education, Training and Development–NQF organising fields are not the same as the 20 Classification of Educational Subject Matter (CESM) fields that are also required by some accreditation bodies (see below).
- ▶ **Notional hours and credits:** the estimate of learning time that it takes an average learner to complete the qualification, including

consideration of contact time, research, completion of assignments, time spent in structured learning in the workplace, individual learning. A qualification must have a minimum of 120 credits (10 notional hours equate to 1 credit).

- ▶ **Articulation:** a requirement that all qualifications have systemic, specific, and individual possibilities of connection with other qualifications and/or part-qualifications to allow for the horizontal/lateral, vertical and diagonal movement of learners through the formal education and training system and its linkages with the world of work.

The NQF comprises three sub-frameworks that accommodate sectoral specificities for the development of qualifications and accreditation processes:

- ▶ **Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF):** Levels 5-10, overseen by the Council on Higher Education ([CHE](#))
- ▶ **General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-Framework (GFETQSF):** Levels 1-4, overseen by [Umalusi](#)
- ▶ **Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework (OQSF):** Levels 1-8, overseen by the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations ([QCTO](#))



The following logic applies to the NQF:

- ▶ Qualifications<sup>1</sup> are registered on the NQF by SAQA based on the recommendation of one of the three Quality Councils (QCs) (see above). Registered qualifications are in the public domain and are accessible via the [NQF MIS](#). Part-qualifications with an occupational orientation can be registered in their own right but should be linked to a “parent” qualification.
- ▶ Education and training providers offer courses (also referred to as learning programmes) that lead to nationally registered qualifications if they meet the requirements set by the relevant QC. Training providers have a degree of flexibility at a curriculum and assessment level when they design their courses, but the overall objectives, purpose and scope of the registered qualification must be adhered to. Course content is not necessarily in the public domain, depending on the preferences of the training provider.

The terms ‘qualification’, ‘course’ and ‘learning programme’ are often used interchangeably in the public domain. In order to simplify public understanding and use of the NQF this is not necessarily a problem, but when engaging in a more formal process, such as an application for accreditation, the differences are important (also see below). ‘Unit standards’ are a specific example of part-qualifications on the NQF developed during the early years of the NQF and are gradually being replaced by part-qualifications that meet new requirements.



1 <https://www.saqa.org.za/nqfpedia/>

The formal accreditation process in South Africa for private providers comprises of the following components:

- ▶ The private provider must first be registered with the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) to operate as an academic institution. Registration is a prerequisite for accreditation (see below)<sup>2</sup>. The application currently costs R500 and takes up to six months to complete.
- ▶ Secondly, the registered institution should apply for accreditation for a particular period by a Quality Council (or its appointed agent) as having the capacity or provisional capacity to offer a qualification or part-qualification registered on the NQF at the required standard. In this regard there are three options<sup>3</sup>:
  - Academic and professional programmes pitched at NQF levels 5-10: Providers apply to the Council on Higher Education (CHE) for programme accreditation<sup>4</sup>. The CHE also requires institutional audits to assess the institution's capacity for quality management<sup>5</sup>. The CHE specifies 11 qualification types. The costs range between R4,000 to R8,000 per programme and R5,000 for audits<sup>6</sup>. Programme accreditation takes between 9-18 months to complete.
  - Occupational programmes pitched at NQF levels 1-8: Skills development providers apply to the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO)<sup>7</sup> for provider accreditation. The process involves institutional compliance and programme

delivery readiness. The QCTO specifies nine occupational qualification types that need to comprise knowledge, theory, and application (which includes practical skills, work experience, and simulated work experience) components and an External Integrated Summative Assessment (EISA). The QCTO has delegated quality assurance powers to Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs). The cost for accreditation is currently R750<sup>8</sup> and takes between 3-6 months.

- General and vocational programmes pitched at NQF levels 1-4: Private providers and assessment bodies apply to Umalusi<sup>9</sup> for provider accreditation. Umalusi specifies four qualification types and requires providers to submit the curriculum with the qualification. The cost for accreditation<sup>10</sup> starts around R30,000 and can take between 6-12 months to complete.

The NQF ecosystem has matured since being established in 1995, but citizens and training providers agree that it has become unnecessarily complicated to navigate. The proliferation of qualifications on the NQF and the lack of sufficient articulation options between qualifications are problematic and have led to many calls for the simplification of the NQF, its policies, and the work of SAQA and the three QCs. Following an external impact evaluation of the NQF Act in 2016, several processes now address these weaknesses. Most recently, in 2023, a formal NQF review process has been initiated by SAQA in collaboration with DHET, DBE and the QCs.

2 <https://www.dhet.gov.za/SitePages/DocRegisters.aspx>, <https://www.gov.za/services/education-and-training-bodies/register-private-fet-institution>

3 <https://www.saqa.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Guideline-Document-for-Development-of-Quals-signed.pdf>

4 <https://www.che.ac.za/focus-areas/programme-accreditation>

5 <https://www.che.ac.za/focus-areas/institutional-audits>

6 [https://www.che.ac.za/sites/default/files/publications/CHE\\_Form\\_PP\\_Guidelines\\_2001.pdf](https://www.che.ac.za/sites/default/files/publications/CHE_Form_PP_Guidelines_2001.pdf)

7 <https://www.qcto.org.za/assets/sdpsaccreditation.pdf>

8 <https://www.qcto.org.za/assets/sdpsaccreditation.pdf>

9 <https://www.umalusi.org.za/services/accreditation/application-for-accreditation/>

10 <https://www.umalusi.org.za/docs/misc/2018/Open-letter-to-Applicants-Private-FET-Colleges-as-at-2018-12.pdf>





Non-formal learning is not part of the NQF as previously mentioned. This does not mean that the courses offered outside of the NQF are of less value. Non-formal courses eventually get taken up in the formal system as they gain currency and prominence. In many cases non-formal learning is more agile and can fill demand needs much quicker than formal qualifications. Providers offering non-formal learning courses have a few options:

- ▶ **Mixed offering.** If the provider also offers formal training (see above), the non-formal courses can be articulated within the institution to allow for more flexible pathways and credit transfer. Such an option would however be limited to function only within the specific institution and may only be applicable outside of it if there are specific agreements in place (see the structure options below).
- ▶ **Keep the training non-formal.** There are many examples of shorter certifications (increasingly referred to as micro-credentials) that are offered outside of formal systems but have good credibility and are demand based. There are many signs internally, and more recently also in South Africa, for the development of platform-based solutions that allow more seamless interoperability between formal, non-formal and informal learning

achievements to be codified and captured through some type of micro-credentials framework. SAQA and the QCs, with support from DHET, will be engaging in this area in the months and years to follow.

- ▶ **Apply for formal recognition.** This is the 'gold standard' and should be undertaken if formal recognition within the education and training system is important. For accredited providers, this means applying for an additional programme to be included in their accreditation status (see the 'mixed offering' option above), and for non-accredited providers, this means applying for registration at DHET, and then one of three accreditation routes depending on the type of course being offered.
- ▶ **Apply for RPL post completion.** An individual can apply for an RPL process with an accredited provider to determine the match between the completed course and a registered qualification on the NQF. There are cost implications, but this option does provide the individual with a choice to explore a formal comparison that would be nationally accepted. In most cases, the individual will receive a partial match and will be required to continue with a formal programme before being certified.





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## Section 3

# Case Studies



## Introduction

A multiple case study approach was used to explore how selected micro-credentials have successfully been applied in South Africa. The case studies were informed by an ecosystem approach according to which the environment where the micro-credential functions are considered, how the micro-credential equips learners with skills, knowledge and practical experience that align with labour market needs.

The case studies for South Africa were selected in close collaboration with the UNICEF country team. Starting with an initial list of six, the final selection is included in the table below. The table also gives a high-level summary of the source of funding for the organisations profiled; their status; areas of focus when it comes to location, including target group; as well as skills focus; and the modality of training delivery.

**Table 1:**

Summary of micro-credential case studies for South Africa

Project	Life Skills and Citizenship Education (LSCE)	National Pathways Management Network (NPMN)	Afrika Tikun	Green Learning Pathways
<b>Funder</b>	UNICEF	National Youth Development Agency	Multiple	Dept. Forestry, Fisheries & Environment
<b>Status</b>	International NGO/NPO	Government	Non-Profit Company	Government Expanded Public Works Programme
<b>Location</b>	Rural	Online resource	Urban/Rural	Rural
<b>Target group</b>	UNICEF	Unemployed youth	Multiple programmes	EPWP
<b>Skills focus</b>	School curriculum driven	General skills in work seeking	Retail, Hospitality, ICT, Agriculture	Climate jobs programme, Green skills pathways
<b>Modality/contact</b>	F2F	Online	F2F	F2F
<b>Micro-credential in progress</b>	Yes	No	Yes	Yes



## Case study 1: Green 'learning to earning' pathways

*Green 'learning to earning' pathways* involved interviews with four key stakeholders from two organisations, Rhodes University, that is working on the project and GroundTruth which is a consulting company that works in the area of water resources, biodiversity, and environmental engineering. The partners work with young people in rural communities by training them as environmental champions for their communities and work to leave them with tools to access the labour market beyond the work that they do in those localities. Rhodes University and GroundTruth work in collaboration with other organisations to achieve these goals while keeping their focus on water resource management.

GroundTruth has focused on young people who are mainly based in rural communities, and they aim to give them skills and a sense of ownership in what is going on in those communities. They recognised that young people want to do meaningful work in life, but they face challenges such as social and economic issues preventing them from getting into universities or colleges, as well as a lack of information about accessing higher education. They also realised that there are programmes such as the EPWP where young people only get salaries for as long as the programme exists but found it problematic and that these do not lead to qualifications either. This leads to stagnant salaries, where those coming from universities enter work and out-earn colleagues even after just arrived. They work with young people from areas such as the Olifant's catchment in Mpumalanga and Limpopo, as well as Umgeni in KwaZulu-Natal in which do not have offer 'matric' level education and are working as environmental monitors or champs.

The work in which GroundTruth has engaged focuses on empowering young people by embarking on a learning programme for two years. The programme was meant to spark interest for engaging in the affairs of their community and engaging with the elders in the community concerning collectively owned land issues. The young people engaged in the learning programme indicated that they wanted some

form of accreditation as they would like to get jobs beyond this initiative, which was a challenge since the organisation is not an accredited training provider and the process of being accredited is difficult and takes time.

Through Rhodes University, GroundTruth ran a few online courses during the COVID-19 pandemic period. One short course related to green skills and facilitating social learning processes for stakeholder engagement was available to anyone and not restricted to usual NQF prerequisites before enrolling. Feedback proved the desire for such courses, including topics such as natural resource management and water management. Following this period, they started a process where Rhodes University allows people to register for these courses, following an application process where one specifies how many credits and notional hours they want.

GroundTruth has also recently completed a project with Water Research Commission (WRC) which is the Ecological infrastructure for water security, as well as a pilot, working with practitioners in the field. For this short course, administrative details were easy, as they had already completed a course. With the work that UNICEF is doing, they realised that this is much bigger work that is trying to get occupational pathway recognition. The Wetlands Assessment course in the Geography Department at Rhodes University is an NQF level 8 course and is also accredited by the South African Council for Natural Scientific Professions (SACNASP). GroundTruth also runs a few accredited courses for professional ecologists, as well as school children in communities, using a miniSASS, which is a simple tool to monitor the health of a river.

GroundTruth has been engaging with institutions such as the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) and found that they are restructuring and finding new ways for their processes to articulate new programmes as occupations and taking over some of the functions of the SETAs. These new pathways can

be called part qualifications or skills development programmes, and these can be recognised formally if they follow the steps outlined by the QCTO. This ensures that people will get something useful beyond the lifespan of the programmes. GroundTruth has been working with the practitioners and acting as a intermediary, engaging the QCTO around this initiative. Some of the courses they offer are accredited by the SACNASP as mentioned.

GroundTruth has been working with practitioners who are implementing various learning modules around Citizen Science, integrating this with research that shows what people are learning and the needs that exist to potentially turn this into an alternative pathway for young people who cannot go to universities. There has been limited engagement with employers outside of the environmental work with practitioners and the communities they work in.

GroundTruth works with young people from disadvantaged communities and aims to get them involved in the affairs of their communities. They ensure dialogue between young people who are part of their programmes and the rest of the community, especially the elders, who create awareness about the work they do and gets everyone involved. They are using YOMA to build learning pathways but mainly as a hosting system. Engagement with the QCTO is to have their courses in the database to be recognised formally, later moving these to other universities such as University of KwaZulu Natal (UKZN).

GroundTruth has been doing some work with the Duzi-uMngeni Conservation Trust (DUCT), which is a non-profit public benefit organisation championing the environmental health of the uMsunduzi and uMngeni Rivers. Through this partnership they have trained several 'envirochamps', which describes people within a community who monitor rivers, wetlands, and open manholes, including door to door education around the areas they live. Their engagement with UNICEF and the YOMA platform came about when someone they work with spoke to UNICEF and they were interested in using the miniSASS

tool to reach more young people and link this training to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). They had challenges trying to get this course accredited, structuring it according to unit standards working with a consultant, leading to further funding issues.

Ideally, learning programmes in this initiative will lead to an accredited certification that enables young people to get jobs. Currently these programmes do not have this component, but engagement with institutions such as the QCTO will ensure this takes place. Engagements are still in the early stages and ongoing. Funding is always a challenge that must be considered when engaging in such a process and is acknowledged but necessary for the success of these interventions. The main aim is for this become an alternative pathway that is formally recognised with opportunities for enterprise development, both from the points of view of circular economy, as well as the economic enterprise development.

### Main takeaways

- ▶ Young people want the training that they complete to be accredited to get jobs beyond the lifespan of the programmes in which they are enrolled. For this reason, GroundTruth loses some young people to the formal employment sector from time to time.
- ▶ The type of work that organisations are doing is about empowering young people but also about getting the whole community involved, ensuring ownership of their collective communal land issues.
- ▶ Rhodes University is bringing the research element to this work, using their social learning experience around facilitating short courses and advocating working with the QCTO instead of the SETAs. In this regard GroundTruth is bringing the practitioner level contribution, working with Rhodes for its success.

## Case study 2: Afrika Tikkun

Afrika Tikkun is a non-governmental organization (NGO) that works in the area of youth skills and job placement. The organisation currently works in South Africa only with no immediate plans to expand beyond that. The other important thing to note is that Afrika Tikkun has two components to it, the foundation, and the social enterprise. For the work that they do with young people, funding is outcomes based, meaning that they get paid based on the number of jobs they create for their beneficiaries, with an 85% placement rate being the benchmark.

Afrika Tikkun provides skills training for young people helping them transition from training into the world of work. They provide bursaries to a small percentage of their beneficiaries for full study at a university. Most of their work is on micro-credentialing, where they train young people on both hard and soft skills and then place them in employment. The organisation's main goal as it pertains to young people is to give them the best chance of getting a job. The work with Harambee which is a major partner in the National Pathways Management Network, is another initiative that is profiled as one of the four case studies for South Africa.

The organisation supports young people who are unemployed and are looking for jobs, but also those who are looking for study opportunities as they provide a small percentage of their beneficiaries with bursaries (also referred to as scholarships in some countries) to study at a university. They do also work with unemployed graduates in the space of engineering such as in the automotive space which is one of their

skilling focus areas. They recruit from SAYouth.mobi which is a free platform for networking that connects young unemployed South Africans to jobs and learning opportunities in their area. They have a stringent recruitment process that involves psychometric testing, criminal background check, interview with a social worker and a final selection by an employer partner.

The organisation has seven key focus areas of training and bridging the transition into the workplace for young people, including Information Communication Technology (ICT), retail and call centre, hospitality, vocational skills, education, and care work (this includes early childhood development (ECD), agriculture and automotive skills training.

In the ICT space particularly, Afrika Tikkun trains young people over a period of five to six months, twelve months for less skilled young people who are just beginning work. Learnership students are trained and certified using international vendor certifications, because in the IT space, learners need to have both IT skills and be familiar with the tools or engines developed by Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEM) such as Microsoft, Cisco, Oracle and others. Learners are trained as data analysts, cloud developers, software developers, cloud administrators, cyber security specialists, desktop technicians and other skills. Even though some may leave with one certification, we encourage multiple certifications as this improves the opportunities in the job marketplace and some companies might be using different tools while they might have been trained on another.



In the agricultural sector, Afrika Tikkun runs a programme with the AgriSETA which lasts six months and at the end, they provide results for the credit bearing programme. Farmers, much like those in the IT sector, are looking for people who can do the job, and the graduates of this programme are employed once they complete their training. A similar thing has been done in the retail space where they have developed a four-month programme, and they are placed within retail stores. The challenge has been experienced in the automotive industry where they are working with unemployed graduates who are brushed up for a period of a month or two and they get employed. They work with different SETAs where they have above 90% of students who exit the programmes. They do short skills programmes and short courses as well for students to gain immediate skills for employability without necessarily getting certification in these instances.

The organisation has a platform called Mzansi Digital Learning that is in partnership with Microsoft, and they are trying to partner with UNICEF's YOMA platform for scale. They point out that the partnership has been initiated to increase the rate of micro-credentialing and that for those that do well, the organisation will pay for their certification. They also can offer this service to organisations who can request a customised landing page for their staff.

Afrika Tikkun uses a learning management system (LMS) where all the information about trainees is kept and administered. They are currently using Placement Partner where they also advertise,

while they develop their own in-house system. The training division, with its administration team ensures that all agreements with the trainees are in order, such as learnership agreements, employment contracts and all other onboarding documentation. They also have candidate HR officers whose role is to support them throughout the programme with services such as psychosocial support, coaching and mentoring and escalate other matters to the life coach or social worker they have. Programmes costs vary per student with each one negotiated at its inception which leads to different costing overall.

For micro-credentialing, this is the core of the business for Afrika Tikkun. A lot of the young people have not gone to university, but have an interest in IT, so after being trained and certified with these international certifications from Microsoft for instance, they become valuable in the job marketplace and can compete internationally. In the ICT space, 50% of the credentialing is done by Afrika Tikkun and the other 50% is done by partners. The organisation does the training and uses the certification of the partners they work with such as Microsoft, with the same breakdown in the agriculture sector, and in the retail sector they do most of the training themselves. In the structuring of the programmes, assessments, and credentials, they look at the jobs, which are in demand and what the employers need, which informs the whole process. Besides working with Microsoft in terms of the certification of courses, they also have courses that are connected to LinkedIn learning.

For employers, partnerships are key to ensuring the success of the programmes offered by Afrika Tikkun. In the technology space, which is one of the focus areas for training, employers do not put emphasis on qualifications but rather on whether a candidate can do the work they would be hired to do, as most people with qualifications are not prepared to do the work. This has influenced the industry to focus on what candidates can do regardless of whether they were trained in the formal or informal sector by a myriad of training providers existing online and offline.

Afrika Tikkun is part of forums where they get a sense of what employers are seeking and they talk to employers on a one-on-one basis to get insight into how to structure their programmes and credentialing. The SETAs and industry bodies are also a source of such information on the in-demand and relevant skills and job roles. This is an annual practice where businesses release a list of skills they need, and the SETAs use this information to come up with a critical skills list which then Afrika Tikkun can use to inform their programmes.

The SAYouth.mobi platform and the relationship they are currently forging with UNICEF's YOMA platform creates a wider reach to potential beneficiaries. Their own platform, Mzansi Digital Learning is another way to increase their reach to the demography of people they are targeting for skills development and job placement.

Afrika Tikkun has opened an office in KwaZulu Natal and operate the Youth Employment Service (YES) programme for youth with disabilities. The focus there is also on learnerships and job placement and entrepreneurship.

The agreements that they have with their clients is that they get paid for an 85% placement rate, based on outcome and impact. They have a team whose only job is to find employer partners and when they start their programmes, these are already lined up.

Afrika Tikkun has done internal evaluations of their programmes but have not had external evaluations done at their request. Although they pointed out that their partners have done evaluations, such as ABSA and Alan Gray.

### Main takeaways

- ▶ The organisation is aware that the high unemployment rate in South Africa is concentrated in the youth between 18-25-years-old at the 'matric' level (Grade 12) sitting at about 62%. Interestingly, the graduate unemployment rate is very low in comparison to those without a university qualification, sitting around 10.2% according to Afrika Tikkun, noting that the better educated a person is, the more opportunities they will have available to them. One of the reasons for this high unemployment rate is the mismatch between skills and requirements in the world of work or industry.
- ▶ Another point is that one does not need a university degree to earn a lot of money. Their graduates from the previous year (2022) earn between R5 000 to R50 000 on average. Within one year of graduating, they can be earning around R45 000 especially in the IT sector, which is far more than the staff of the organization that trained them.
- ▶ According to Afrika Tikkun, South Africa is wrong in terms of how learners have been taught, where they are trained to be employees instead of entrepreneurs, which Afrika Tikkun has made part of their training. They help those who go the entrepreneurship route to get started. They note that success comes after some failure. Soft skills are also an area of focus in the training instead of just the hard skills.

### Case study 3: National Pathways Management Network

The National Pathways Management Network (NPMN) is an initiative managed by the presidency office of the South African government. It is made up of a network of organisations that work together to connect unemployed youth to job opportunities. Part of the case study included interviews with representatives of some of the organisations that are part of the network or are connected to it. One of the partners in the network is the PSET CLOUD<sup>11</sup>, which was involved in the space micro-credentials and youth empowerment related to the network. Harambee is another key partner within the network. Ecubed-DBE is another initiative that was part of the organisations engaged in this area, including Singizi Consulting Africa.

Micro-credentials are seen considering unit standards, small packets of learning linked to the digital world, such as digital badges. The PSET CLOUD, which was funded by Manufacturing, Engineering and Related Services Sector

Education and Training Authority (merSETA), has done extensive research which was five years into a digital interoperable platform. Learners and jobseekers can be part of the platform, still owning their data, and interacting with employer organisations. This was done while engaging quality assurance bodies in the country and some government institutions, these include South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), various Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs), and the Quality Council for Trades & Occupations (QCTO).



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11 <https://psetcloud.org.za/>



The youth seeking training and job placement are the primary focus for the network. There are offices around the country for career services including the employment services platform with databases on unemployed youth and they are encouraged to be part of the platforms that are connected to the NPMN to get the services toward being employed. These also link to other platforms or offices that work with the government on reducing unemployment and reducing skills gaps to coordinate efforts to achieve this task. The Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) is one of the pathways, apart from the NPMN under the broader presidential efforts to address youth unemployment in the country.

From the time the COVID-19 pandemic started, the DBE launched the TeacherConnect platform which has learning and teaching content including SACE accredited project-based learning courses, a helpdesk, and real-time dashboards, to support teachers. The platform currently has around 500 000 users. The department also went on a drive to recruit and employ young people to become teacher assistants after receiving a stimulus from the treasury. The recruitment was handled by Harambee and through the SAYouth.mobi platform where there was a process of interviews and subsequent appointments of young people—now up to about 800 000 youth.

The programme includes many different parts that are contributed by the different partners. Harambee, although not providing micro-credentials itself, plays a major role in the network, with an overarching role of helping connect young people to opportunities of earning and learning. One of the programmes is run by Ecubed, which is a teacher assistant programme with a current cohort of 250 000. The recruitment is done by Harambee and Ecubed does the work of onboarding both the teacher assistants and teachers. They support youth to improve their exit outcomes. They have sought more

funding from the government and are collecting evidence to support this, to show that this intervention leads to better outcomes in learning and support for teachers but also that it improves the employability of these youth and helps with their transition into formal employment. DG Murray Trust is currently working on this aspect. They also worked with Junior Achievement South Africa—an organisation with a mission to empower young people economically, aiming to bridge the gap between classroom education and the world of work. Through this partnership with Junior Achievement, they have given some of these young people entrepreneurship training, since their aim is not only to focus on young people getting employment but to also get into the space of entrepreneurship. In addition to this, they try to find out who in this current cohort has small businesses or other ‘side hustles’ and to help them formalise these where possible.

The credentialing process in the network takes different forms as there are different skill providers with differing programmes. Within this engagement of young people, the network acknowledges that young people need skills that enable them to access the labour market through smaller units of learning, but they do not all need to be accredited or lead to certification. This is because the network is trying to create a space where all kinds of training can be considered valid with or without a credential attached to it. For the other training that is accredited, it is done with the SETAs that provide learnership for different skills training needs and requirements. The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) has always struggled with the accreditation of some of the training that takes place outside of the system it operates in, and the network is trying to work in that space where some of the training will have different outcomes, but all still lead to positive outcomes for young people seeking jobs. Some lead to partial qualification, unit standards, or the vendor led credentials.

One of the initiatives that emanates from the Presidential Youth Employment Intervention (PYEI) is a demand-led skilling programme, which is more focused on outcomes rather than the nature of the training itself. The funding for it fit that model and the training takes different durations from a few months to a year.

Ecubed noted that there is work happening in SACE, where they are developing micro-credentials for teachers, but of course this does not relate directly to scope of the case study; it is part of broader developments in the government space to move in this direction.

ICT is vendor-based, and this makes the link to employment easier but other industries are different. Employers want certain skills gaps fulfilled and the network is trying to work with them by providing training for those skills without necessarily using the formal system but learnerships that can be provided by SETAs.

As noted, Harambee does not run a credentialing programme in the network but plays an important role nonetheless. As explained by one of the contacts in this research, this is what they do in a nutshell:

When looking at the teacher assistants' programme, there is built-in engagement with employers, because the DBE and its provincial subsidiary departments employ in the public schooling system.

As part of the work of the network, several platforms for employment services have been developed, influenced by the move towards digitalisation. Harambee is central in the work that the network does in relation to employment services. Since this initiative consists of many different organisations, they offer a myriad of services not limited to linkages to jobs and training, but also dissemination of relevant information to young people across the country about things that are happening in the world of work and skills training.

Funding forms part of the sustainability of any initiative and in this case, the government through the PEYI funds the initiative.

**The old Harambee model pre-2020 included some skilling – this was in the form of what we called the 'bridge' – a 6–8-week intervention to close gaps of young people on behaviours for work and skills for a specific role. It was 'demand-led' in that the employer outlines their vacancies (e.g., needing 25 contact centre agents) and we would recruit young people into the bridging program where at the end of it, they would be interviewed by the employer to be placed. There was no skilling towards certificates so youth could find their own work – we contracted the employer upfront, so we never issued skills credentials. Post 2020, we no longer run in person skilling but connect young people to opportunities advertised online via sayouth.mobi platform.**

The network not only focuses on hard skills but also soft skills or building the capacity of the young people. For example, making sure that a person can attend all day if they are going to work in retail or can tolerate the cold if they are going to be working in the meat industry in freezers.

### Main takeaways

- ▶ The language of training institutions is very different from the one used by employers in job descriptions. This necessitates the creation of a common language and synergy, and UCT was approached to work on a common language for South Africa as noted from the PSET CLOUD perspective.
- ▶ NPMN is a network of networks with the aim of connecting young people to employment but also increasingly providing learnerships as the youth are not just looking for work but training opportunities too. This is done through the partner organisations that are part of the network, providing career related information and guidance.
- ▶ The focus is not only on credentialed skilling that leads to certification but also skills development that creates access to the labour market through smaller units of learning. They are trying to move away from the notion that only credentialed training is valid but find other ways to achieve the same recognition of various kinds of training.
- ▶ People are always going to get better jobs with university degrees and this network is only supplementary and not an alternative pathway for youth to get good jobs in the labour market.
- ▶ Fostering an entrepreneurial mindset in young people as early as possible is crucial. Linking this to the idea of creating value to others and not necessarily focusing on business plan writing and pitching a business idea.



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## Case study 4: Life Skills and Citizenship Education Framework

UNICEF's Life Skills & Citizenship Education Framework has several organisations involved including a combination of other UN agencies, international organizations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), social enterprises and government institutions<sup>12</sup>. For the purposes of the case study, they contribute to the LSCE framework but not all focusing on the out-of-school youth, but all efforts toward strengthening the framework.

The NECT, along with the support from other development partners including UNICEF and Save The Children, has been working with the DBE on its curriculum strengthening initiative that involved coming up with a competency framework for the current curriculum that has been in place since 2012.

This is of course in the formal school system and covers school-going-children from ECD to completion in Grade 12. This was done with wide public consultations countrywide that included all the stakeholders in education that includes provincial departments, teachers and teacher unions, the business sector, and most importantly the learners, including those living with disabilities. SCSA is heavily involved in the work with the learners for these consultations and has been part of the development of the competency framework. Linking this work with out-of-school youth is the introduction of the General Education Certificate (GEC), with its intended aim of targeting Grade 9 learners who

might exit the system at that point or past that point but before Grade 12, to have a statement of the attributes they possess, such as collaboration, communication, creativity for instance, that can help them in transitioning to the world of work as these are more important in the current and future worlds of work.

In the platform run by Capacitate, youth are noted to have a hand in the running of the platform which gives them agency in the direction of how these interventions should be managed. This is one way of getting young people involved in their own learning and getting a sense of ownership and control.

SCSA have some programmes that they offer globally and are credentialed in-house, but more for the South African environment, they conducted some training in the Free State (online or in-person) about positive discipline, in response to the high level of corporal punishment that still exists in the area. They can put this on their curriculum vitae (CV) as training they have completed. SCSA also does have programmes for staff, and they can move through different levels based on how many of these they take. More importantly, for young people, those who are willing to take these courses can be seen in a positive light for their eagerness to learn and potentially move up in the organization. This is useful for young people who are new to the working environment or SCSA itself to make those quick transitions.

12 The LSCE Initiative is led by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in collaboration with partners at country, regional and global levels. It brings together the active contribution of the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO), along with Ministries of Education and other national institutions responsible for education across the MENA countries. Regional and global partners include: Aflatoun International, the Arab Institute for Human Rights (AIHR), Birzeit University (BZU), Deutsche Post DHL Group, the International Labour Organization (ILO), the International Youth Foundation (IYF), Mercy Corps, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Save the Children, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the United Nations Relief and Work Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), the World Bank, and the World Food Programme (WFP).

Capacitate sees the space of training moving towards digital IDs, where proof of an educational experience is linked to this tool and serves as a credential, and these are offered by non-traditional institutions. An example of this includes banking records with attributes such as demographic data and work experience. This of course then leads to the need for increased data protection for the individuals. They see this space remaining in the more informal sector as going the formal route through the SETAs, which can be cumbersome and time consuming as this can get caught up in government bureaucracy. This course would work against the agile nature of micro-credentialing and the accessibility to target markets that are out of school and may lack resources to engage the formal system. SAQA is aligned with this way of thinking to some extent, within their responsibility to ensure proper registration of qualifications, they realise that they should not try to register all forms of training but allow them the space to exist and they could find a way to highlight them in some way. Capacitate sees the coexistence of the formal system of training with the informal/non-formal space and recognises the complexity of this proposition. To highlight this coexistence, 'We need to acknowledge that we exist in a continuum and should only be regulating the "bits" that need to be regulated. That does not mean that we don't work with all of it, but I would be very cautious about wanting to regulate/ register it all'.

As noted earlier, employers were engaged in the development of the competency framework through the consultations that were carried out through the country. From the SAQA side, they do not really engage with employers around the issues

of skills and training or credentialing. One of the institutions that works within the same ecosystem in the formal side is the QCTO which can get requests for the accreditation of certain training programmes by training providers in the main.

SAQA sees the space of skills development and training as a coexistence of both the formal and informal/non-formal systems. The authority does not aim to regulate all training that exists but is trying to find ways to highlight this training. They gave an example of the ICT space by noting that, 'The IT/ vendor example is a good example of the system that we don't want to break with regulation'. They do acknowledge that in the country, qualifications are used for credibility to the labour market, and that it seems that everyone wants the qualification registered on NQF. When talking about credentials, they stress being specific to education as this is the space where they work, highlighting 'that credentials signal achievements that are broader than education only, which is why we are not using credentials. We prefer to talk about qualifications and micro-qualifications to make the distinction'.

There is also a view that the space of micro-credentials is well suited to work with Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), and that RPL can be seen as a form of pedagogy within the skills training space where learners are not seen as new to the training space and that what they have learned along the way is acknowledged.

The competency framework is a long-term solution or intervention on curriculum strengthening for the South African schooling system.

## Main takeaways

- ▶ The GEC is an intervention to give something useful to learners who might exit the formal system at Grade 9 or beyond, but it has received some criticisms for potentially encouraging learners to exit the schooling system.
- ▶ South Africa has a very strong embedded NQF regulatory system that has been reviewed a few times and there is acknowledgement that in the promotion of lifelong learning, smaller units of learning might need to be incorporated, but it should be considered in the way forward.
- ▶ SAQA understands micro-credentials as smaller units of learning that encompass credit-based and non-credit-based units of learning leading to a job but also falling within the space of learning for the sake of learning and they are still grappling with all these concepts. The authority is careful around the issue of not leaving the students behind in the quest for futuristic thinking but is taking a measured approach of introducing new systems incrementally over time. This is informed by the fact that the country comes from a particular history and things that might be possible elsewhere, such as in Europe.
- ▶ *Capacitate* sees the space as more agile where employers are looking for completion of training and the ability for someone to do the job. This might be a risk, but not more of a risk than someone with a degree poses. If a training organisation has enough brand credibility, that is enough with employers - they are not looking to see if credentials are SETA accredited.



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## Section 4

# Towards A Micro-Credentials Model For South Africa





## Underpinning principles

South Africa has a long history of formalizing education and training through its development of a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) in the 1990s during the first wave of development. This has led to a long history of entrenched policies and practices cultivated over this 30-year period that has made the system less flexible to new changes taking place in the education and training ecosystem. The relationship between education and training and the labour market is such that formal qualifications and training receive primacy over other forms of training and qualifications. The formal qualifications can be received from higher education institutions such as universities or TVET colleges. Universities remain the main goal for matriculants as the qualifications from those institutions are seen as being more valuable than those received from other institutions, and not without reason, as they lead to more employability for the graduates. TVET colleges rank second to universities and are often a second or last resort for those who did not find space in a university or qualify for entrance. TVET college graduates in South Africa often find it more difficult to successfully find jobs than their university counterparts and the completion rates in that system are below par.

The country has been struggling with stubborn unemployment rates even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which only exacerbated issues when parts of the economy were shutdown (including partial or complete ban on the sale of products such as alcohol and cigarettes, which is a source of income) and the country went into lockdown. With about

nine million youth not enrolled in education, employment or training (NEET) in South Africa (CDE, 2021), there is enough reason to conclude that the formal training and qualifications system is not enough for all the young people who either complete their basic education and need to get trained and qualified for jobs that are in the labour market, or those who drop out along the way and still need to get trained or qualified for the jobs in the labour market. South Africa being a high middle-income country means that the bulk of jobs are in the secondary and tertiary sectors of the economy. Additionally, the country is highly urbanised compared to other ESA countries and that means young people are looking for jobs in urban spaces, close to where they live.

### Availability of formal jobs in the local labour market

For developing micro-credentials, it is useful to consider the distribution of employment opportunities in the labour market. Based on the table below, higher proportions of the working population in South Africa are engaged in the services and industrial sector, compared to Uganda and Burundi. This suggests that occupations selected for micro-credentials should be in the service or industry sector, with a wider range of occupations to select. This is not to say that the agricultural sector cannot offer work opportunities but rather that specific occupational openings would need to be identified at a local level perhaps through engaging with employers in the local area.



**Table 2:**

Employment distribution in agriculture, services, and industry as a proportion of total employment in percentages (2019)

Country/region	% of total employment in agriculture	% of total employment in services	% of total employment in industry
Burundi	86	10	3
South Africa	5	72	22
Uganda	72	21	7
SSA (excl. high Income)	53	36	11

**Source:** World Bank (2023)

Being a middle-income country, South Africa has many job offerings in the formal sector, which requires education for even entry-level jobs. An educated workforce then becomes imperative to keep demand and supply at an equilibrium or at least in step with each other to an extent. When there are limited spaces in HEIs for the learners who leave basic education every year, this limits the ability to balance training and labour market needs. With the limited spaces, the completion rates in both universities and TVET colleges remain low, compounded with mismatched skills and the labour market requirements that lead to the persistent high unemployment rates (Arends, Visse, Powell, Bhorat and Reddy, 2016).

Micro-credentials have the potential to make up for some of the gaps that created by the current environment of skills training. There is a potential to create oversupply within the labour market, in some fields where work cannot be done remotely, such as in agriculture. In sectors such as tech, people can more commonly get jobs from international companies without the need to relocate because the job can be done remotely. This creates a global labour market where a job search is no longer restricted to the available job spaces locally, but globally.

### Familiarity of students with online environments

According to the CHE (2023), learner, employee and employer awareness is low on alternative forms of learning that includes micro-credentials, even with the rapid growth of these alternatives. There is not much research done in this area in South Africa and the full extent of the trends is very much unknown, with the CHE contending that what is also unknown is the 'quality, relevance, usefulness, stackability and potential articulation and alignment with each other and with formal qualifications' (CHE, 2023). This situation can lead to mistrust in the industry about the viability of micro-credentials and slow uptake from stakeholders on the training and recognition side.

The CHE acknowledges that there is a growing trend around the world of offering micro-credentials as viable, flexible, responsive learning opportunities (CHE, 2023). The council also notes that across the region (Southern Africa), governments and institutions are still grappling with the introduction of micro-credentials into their national systems, the ways of going about it. Some of these institutions have written discussion papers and others are working on draft frameworks for micro-credentials (CHE, 2023).



### The role of platforms in supporting learning-to-earning

Much like other countries, because of the way technology companies have become global entities operating in many countries and jurisdictions offering a myriad of services such as communications, including shopping and payment services, education and training has also become an important offering since the COVID-19 pandemic. There has been an explosion of platforms offering courses online, from short learning programmes lasting a few hours to master's programmes by some of the leading universities in the United States.

With the different platforms that exist online offering a range of courses from short learning programmes to full master's programmes, students have a variety of options. Aside from the duration of programmes offering flexibility, there is a difference in accreditation as well. Some of the micro-credentials are non-accredited and others are accredited. Based on the reason for pursuing a particular learning experience, students can choose either an accredited or non-accredited one. Some of the courses give the option to stack them towards a larger credential.

There are a plethora of websites and platforms available online that youth can exploit to improve their learning progress and quality, as well as their chances of finding a job. In the former, these might include: 'online learning platforms' that can provide a wide variety of learning and network opportunities; 'peer-to-peer learning platforms that can support peer learning with particular

skills/occupational learning interests; 'skill-specific communities' that can be valuable to current practitioners or new entrants. Also, for students who want to build an online presence there are: 'networking platforms', 'portfolio websites' and 'online qualification verification' sites.

In terms of labour market access, the following resources may be profitable: 'job search websites' that may be occupation or industry specific or general; 'freelance or gig economy platforms' that tend to make opportunities available; 'government job portals' that match unemployed and new labour market entrants' workers with employers; 'apprenticeship matching platforms' that support technical and vocational graduates. However, these resources are usually language specific, national, and regional labour market-specific and more effective in well serviced (by electricity and internet access) densely populated, highly connected urban environments. Consequently, the utility of such resources needs to be assessed with reference to the demographic and needs of youth participating in the relevant micro-credential.

Electricity is one binding constraint on access to these facilities, which must be consistently available to operate online devices as well as forms of internet access. In the case of South Africa, this most likely applies to people in rural and peri-urban areas, but to a lesser extent than in citizens in low-income countries. Designing micro-credentials for these areas needs to take this into account, which may mean conducting the micro-credential almost entirely face-to-face except in cases where electricity can support device use.



**Table 3:**

Population access to electricity in percentages (2020)

Country/region	Access to electricity % of population	Rural electrification % of population
<b>Burundi</b>	11.7	3.5
<b>South Africa</b>	84.4	75.3
<b>Uganda</b>	42.1	32.8

Source: World Bank (2023)

**Table 4:**

Informal economy share of national employment in percentages

Country/region	Informal economy as % share of national employment
<b>Burundi (estimated 2017)</b>	93.9
<b>South Africa (2018)</b>	45.2
<b>Uganda (2017)</b>	78.0
<b>Sub-Saharan Africa (excl. high Income)</b>	n.d.

Source: World Bank (2023)



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## Sectoral and occupational directions for micro-credentials

The following are indicative suggestions for economic sectors to implement micro-credential programming. The demand for these occupations may be more or less location-specific and must be investigated prior to implementation. Nevertheless, it is inevitable that some graduates will be inclined to migrate. This is because micro-credential graduates as with any work seekers may be motivated to find employment in the city where wage levels can be higher than in peri-urban or rural areas. Examples include:

- ▶ Information technology (IT) micro-credentials in software development, cybersecurity, and data analysis.
- ▶ Entrepreneurship and small business micro-credentials in financial literacy, and small business management for startups.
- ▶ Manufacturing and engineering micro-credentials including in machine operation and technical maintenance in production systems.
- ▶ Tourism and hospitality micro-credentials in hospitality management, tour guiding, and customer service.
- ▶ Green energy and environmental sustainability micro-credentials related to green energy, sustainability, and environmental management in the renewable energy sector.

## Social protection and active labour market policies

It is necessary to consider vulnerable households when considering the challenges of supporting marginalised youth toward accessing skills development. This is where government

social protection policies play a vital role in lowering barriers such as finance and creating a conducive environment for youth to access skills development opportunities through micro-credentials. This does not necessarily only refer to government support of youth as individuals but their family and households as well. The following is a short overview of the available resources for general social protection of communities and strategies to facilitate labour market access.

### Social Protection Policies:

- ▶ Social Grants include various social grants such as child support grants, old age pensions, and disability grants.
- ▶ Unemployment Insurance provides temporary financial support to eligible individuals who lose their jobs.

### Active Labor Market Policies:

- ▶ Public Employment Services assist job seekers with job placement, counselling, and career guidance.
- ▶ Public Works Programmes create temporary job opportunities in sectors like infrastructure development.
- ▶ Entrepreneurship Support includes small business development and loans for township small businesses.
- ▶ Skills Development and Training in non-accredited and accredited training programmes with support from Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs).

The impact of these policies, if adequately funded and sustained, can create space for youth to participate in micro-credential programmes by indirectly supporting the financial vulnerability of households and their members.



## Outline of a credentialing model for South Africa

### Pathways and progression

Micro-credentials in the South African context offer many opportunities for young people to create links with the labour market through self-directed learning based on interest and areas of high job acquisition probabilities such as in the digital space. Progression pathways can be achieved through micro-credentials in a few ways that are already in place and practice but can benefit from formal inclusion into an ecosystem that connects all the dots, that is skills training seekers, recognised validation systems and employers. The benefit of a more seamless system includes:

- ▶ **Stackability:** The idea that a person can take micro-credential courses and stack them up over time to form a larger credential, is a viable option for people who cannot be in full-time study due to several reasons including financial or time constraints. This flexible pathway enables a person to work toward a much larger credential by combining multiple credentials.
- ▶ **Occupation/employer-linked credentials:** From the case studies, Afrika Tikkun provides a model that is evidently efficient in terms of transitioning unemployed youth into the world of work. They do this by fostering partnerships with employers for their WIL component of their training, and this model has seen them achieve placement rates of over 85%.
- ▶ **Trusted university credentials:** South African universities have the benefit of being trusted providers of formal qualifications and of providing quality. In an environment where there are no official formal channels to accredit micro-credentials, having a stamp of approval from a highly regarded institution provides some level of credibility.

### Peer review and external validation

South Africa already has a plethora of platforms that are linked to the government's effort to address the skills gaps challenge that exists and leads to high unemployment rates, especially for the youth. **A centralised system that can connect all these databases of youth, credentials, and employers in an interoperable way with levels of skills validation can build an environment of trust when all stakeholders are involved with full transparency at the centre.**

To improve labour market success a system of records where young people build a profile of all their learning and are in control must be in place, including data privacy controls in place, where they can access real time data of job opportunities that exist which can help them with career guidance of where they need to focus their learning. Employers likewise can access real time data on the type of credentials that are on the platform for recruitment purposes. Such a platform can be co-managed and co-funded by the stakeholders involved as collaboration from the government and employers creates a better environment for a successful skills system that leads to higher employability for the beneficiaries of such partnerships. This is seen in the micro-credentials where there is a partnership between the provider and employer such as in the case of Afrika Tikkun profiled in this report, and there are other examples across sectors different sectors of the economy.



## Quality assurance mechanisms

The South African system provides clear mechanisms for assuring quality of training in the formal sector. Formal training is credit-bearing, linked to a qualification, accredited by a quality council and are part of nationally recognised systems and frameworks (Czerniewicz, 2022). In the SAQA policy (2021), only full and part qualifications bear credits within the formal system, which are useful for the articulation within the system. This means that training taking place in the non-formal and informal spaces cannot lead up to a recognised qualification even if combined or stacked. While this is currently the case, some form of recognition for such training should find more flexible links to the formal system, which is currently through Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) processes.

Micro-credentials are already a feature in the ecosystem of education and training in South Africa. A myriad of providers both in the public and private space are seeing people registering for courses and being credentialed. A lot of this is happening outside the formal education and training system with different levels of success as can be seen from the case studies. While some models of credentialing have higher levels of employment success such as in the case of Afrika Tikkun's agricultural training where the graduates get jobs when they complete the programme, others such as Green 'learning to earning pathways' where there are no such connections with employers outside the work with the programme, they have the students requesting some form of certification to improve their chances of finding formal employment when they leave the programme.

**There are a few ways for creating a connection between the micro-credentialing world in the non-formal space to the formal recognition space that can be trusted by stakeholders in the education/training-employment arena through new methods that incorporate the benefits brought on by technology to create systems that are interoperable and can bring transparency and increase trust between stakeholders as noted above.**



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## Roles and responsibilities

The South African government has in place infrastructure in the education and training sector to leverage in pursuit of ensuring wider access to opportunities for its citizens to be participants in the economy and become productive members of society. This will include giving opportunities to all citizens to have their skills acquired through all forms of learning in the formal education system, and by non-formal means. This is partly done through the policy of RPL which provides an avenue for those that have acquired their skills outside the formal education system to be formalised to increase their chances of formal economic participation. The structure of the South African system is represented by the following institutions and bodies with their respective responsibilities:

***The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), which registers qualifications and part-qualifications and endorses SETAs as Education and Training Quality Assurance (ETQA) bodies. SETAs are thus empowered to provide complementary quality assurance services under SAQA, including the accreditation of training providers, moderators and assessors operating in their sector.***

***The Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) is tasked with creating and managing an occupational qualification sub-framework for the TVET sector, accrediting skills development providers and assessment centres and the certification of qualifications.***

***The National Artisan Moderation Body (NAMB), responsible for artisanal training.***

***The Council for Quality Assurance in General Further Education and Training (UMALUSI), responsible for a sub-framework of qualifications and quality assurance for general and further education and training, as well as the school's certification programme, TVET colleges and Adult Learning Centres.***

***The CHE is another body that is responsible for education in the post school space, responsible for the registration and accreditation of courses for higher education institutions (HEI).***





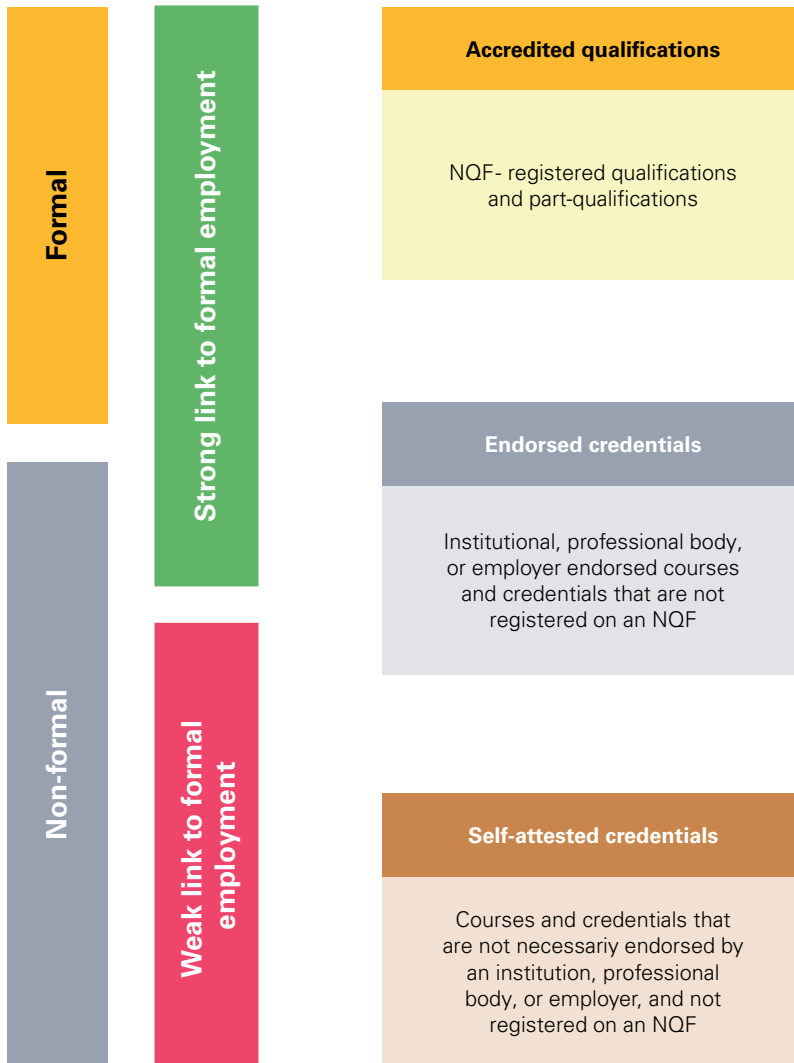
The delivery of smaller chunks of learning through short courses, unit standards, vocational courses and many other examples are already part of the South African education and training offerings regulated under these institutions. Imagining a new framework should be in line with leveraging the opportunities afforded by technology for a more digital design and more agile framework able to recognise all forms of learning.

**Levels of recognition in a system**

The figure shows the range of learning opportunities already in existence in the South African education and training landscape. There are formal qualifications that are obtained in HEIs such as universities and colleges, both public and private. These are institutions registered with the CHE and have accredited programmes. At this level, links with the formal employment sector is strong and many graduates end up in formal employment compared to those who do not have post-matric formal qualifications. This is the “gold standard” of pathways of getting into formal employment in the post school arena.

**Figure 1:**

Range of learning opportunities available in South Africa



Then there are other pathways of getting into formal employment which are newer although have been on offer for several years and made more popular and prominent by the developments that took place on the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic which saw digitization and digitalization of education and training provision. Micro-credentials started to be offered on larger scale through online platforms and gaining wider reach. Although this is the case, some are still provided using face-to-face modalities. The next level on the diagram depicts the micro-credentials that are offered by private providers in the non-formal sector in partnerships with employers. These have a high job placement rate by partner employers or others in the same sector. Examples are the programmes offered by Afrika Tikkun in digital skills and agricultural micro-credentials. Here you find a space that has both accredited and unaccredited programmes, and the accreditation is done through the QCTO. The links to employment are strong at this level. Although given that the programmes are negotiated with partner employers, the wider acceptance with other organisations remains unclear. This is the silver standard.

The next level is also in the non-formal sector and the training is still provided by private providers, with programmes accredited by a professional body. This can bring wider acceptance with a larger network of organisations within the sector. For example, the programme offered in the *Green Learning to Earning* case study with the Wetlands assessment course they run with the department of Geography at Rhodes University which is an NQF level 8 and is also accredited by SACNASP. There is no clear data of the success rate of finding employment after completing the course, and thus this has been classified under the weak links to employment and given the bronze standard of the model.

Still within the area of non-formal sector of micro-credentialing, there are micro-credential

courses that are offered by universities. Although some are available to registered students, there are those that are open to the public. These credentials also do not have clear links to employment but have the potential to start a young person on a journey toward being employable through those credentials or using them as a stepping stone towards more credentials that have stronger links to employment. This is again the bronze standard in the model.

Some of the providers are currently pursuing formal accreditation for some of their course through the QCTO in the SA context, while also offering ICT industry accredited options such as the Microsoft certifications that are more widely accepted within the tech sector without having to go through the formal accreditation processes within the country. RPL still remains another avenue for transitioning into the formal sector and will most likely play this important role going forward. Some of the micro-credentials that are offered might not need formal accreditation but rather recognition in some form and can serve many different purposes such as introduction to fields before a person dives full into a credential journey that will link them with a job opportunity or serve as additional skills for people already employed and want to increase their knowledge in a particular area.

## Concluding note

South Africa is well positioned to use the established NQF system as a basis for a micro-credential framework. The timing of the work planned through the Potential of Micro-credentials in Southern Africa (PoMiSA) that will commence in 2024 will allow for a coordinated national effort to be undertaken, while retaining a focus on partner countries in SADC and in Europe (University of Johannesburg and partners, 2023).



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Published by **UNICEF**

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