

ACADEMIC VS PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATIONS

*By Gizelle McIntyre, director of The Institute of People Development
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Whilst both academic and professional qualifications are recognised and controlled by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and both are indicative of a certain level of achievement, the levels of recognition of these forms of qualification are not always on par.

Although there are various differences between the two, is this distinction in recognition correct, or is too much impetus being placed on academics alone? Not all qualifications are equal, even though this is the primary vision and mission of the NQF. Perhaps a better approach would be for the two to work together to produce a skilled workforce that has both an academic knowledge of the job at hand and the real-world skills to perform the tasks required. Should the good of the country not be the driving force behind education and training, rather than the size of our egos?

There are various fundamental differences between these forms of qualification. An academic qualification involves the study of a subject with an academic discipline and (hopefully) research focus. The overriding purpose of this qualification is a contribution to the learner's specialised knowledge of a subject and not necessarily the application thereof. The purpose of a professional qualification is to impart knowledge, understanding and practical experience to the learner to enable the learner to apply the knowledge in a practical manner, in a professional practice. This obviously leads to a completely different set of skills, each with different purposes and contexts for the world of work.

A learner at The Institute of People Development (IPD) recently asked why the NQF level 5 National Diploma in ETDP was taking her longer and was more difficult than her NQF level 9 qualification from an academic institution. The answer is quite simple; in order to prove competence in an occupationally directed professional qualification it must be proven that the learner has knowledge and understanding of the theory (foundational competence), that the learner has the ability to apply that knowledge and understanding practically (practical competence), and that the learner has the ability to apply that knowledge, understanding and practical skill in an ever changing environment (reflexive competence).

On the one hand, a professional qualification is usually made up of on-the-job training and various short courses, which when combined make up a qualification. On the other hand, the academic route focuses on the theory rather than practical application and leads to a qualification. With either approach, this formal qualification comes with a title that can be utilised infinitely, yet more often than not these titles are not treated as equal in the recruitment space. If regulated by a professional body in the form of a professional designation, such titles must be renewed through annual reregistration with the regulatory body and include continuous professional development (CPD) activities to prove the currency of the skill/s.

The most striking difference between these forms of qualification is perhaps that a professional qualification, due to the nature of the training and the fact that it is built on practice analysis, offers a warrant of competence and expertise. It therefore certifies that, having completed the course or training, the graduate has the essential knowledge and skills to perform the duties required of his/her profession. In contrast, an academic qualification

does not certify competence and is not based on a systematic or formal practice analysis; all it certifies is that the learner has successfully learnt the theory behind the practice. For this reason, should human error lead to damages, no recourse will be permitted to an academic institution, but in certain cases, recourse to a regulatory body may be possible.

A collaborative approach will result in a combined effort in terms of professional and academic qualifications, utilising skills analyses and gap training to expedite the process. This will allow these qualifications to feed off of each other to produce a skilled workforce with knowledge and experience; the perfect solution to combating the current skills-short market.

Perhaps the employers should be asking themselves the question; “Who should be employed in this particular job – someone who is a thought leader and will ensure best practice via specialised knowledge and research (thus an academic appointment), or a skilled professional who will provide best practice application?”

ENDS

** Sources:*

- *Claude Balthazard, Ph.D., CHRP: Director, HR Excellence and Registrar of the Human Resources Professionals Association*
- www.talk.collegeconfidential.com