

# NATIONAL FIRE SERVICES INDABA

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Capacity Building and Training: A Transformative Imperative for Sustainable Fire Services in South Africa

“Transforming Fire Services for Sustainable Communities”

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# LIST TOPICS

1. Introduction
2. Background: Evolution of Firefighter Training in South Africa
  1. SAESI's historic role
  2. Technicon qualifications (T1–T3 and beyond)
  3. Institution of Fire Engineers (IFE)
3. The Shift to Democratic legislation and The Emerging Qualification Crisis
  1. Unaccredited operational qualifications
  2. Officer-level qualification gaps
  3. SAESI's agreement with Studio College
4. Problem Statement
5. Methodology
6. Discussion: Towards a Modern, Accredited Fire Services Training System
7. Expected Outcomes



# INTRODUCTION

The **transformatio**n of South Africa’s fire services for sustainable and resilient communities **hinges** on a robust, coherent, and accredited **capacity-building framework**. Firefighters are frontline protectors of life, property, critical infrastructure, and environmental assets. Yet, despite their essential function, the fire services sector faces a **significant crisis**: its historical **training and qualification system has not transitioned into the democratic** South African skills development regime.

**This paper critically evaluates the evolution, challenges, and future of** training for fire services, with a focus on aligning all qualifications to SAQA, strengthening SETA compliance, and establishing a sustainable national training system. **Presented under the theme “Transforming Fire Services for Sustainable Communities,” the paper addresses legislative misalignments, accreditation gaps, institutional fragmentation, and the need for a national fire academy that can professionalise the sector through standardisation and accreditation.**

# BACKGROUND: EVOLUTION OF FIREFIGHTER TRAINING IN SOUTH AFRICA

Historically, firefighter training in South Africa was delivered through centralised institutions that shaped the professionalisation of the emergency services sector. Foremost among these were the:

- South African Emergency Services Institute (SAESI)
- Institution of Fire Engineers (IFE)
- South African technicons/technical colleges

# BACKGROUND: EVOLUTION OF CONT.

## 1. SAESI's historic role

For decades, SAESI functioned as the principal body responsible for entry-level and officer development training.

Through SAESI-accredited training centres, the institution administered internationally benchmarked operational qualifications such as:

- Fire Fighter I; Fire Fighter II; Hazmat Awareness; Hazmat Operations

These courses were delivered under strict accreditation from the International Fire Service Accreditation Congress (IFSAC) using the IFSTA curriculum.

They became the accepted national standard for operational readiness.

SAESI also provided higher-order officer qualifications, including:

- Higher Certificate in Fire Technology; Diploma in Fire Technology; Advanced Diploma in Fire Technology

# BACKGROUND: EVOLUTION OF CONT.

## 2. Technicon qualifications (T1–T3 and beyond)

In parallel, South African Technikon offered structured academic pathways through the historical T1–T3 Fire Technology programmes, later converted to:

- National Diploma in Fire Technology
- Bachelor of Technology (BTech) in Fire Technology

These qualifications supported officer progression, command roles, and fire safety specialisation.

# BACKGROUND: EVOLUTION OF CONT.

## 3. Institution of Fire Engineers (IFE)

The IFE offered its own internationally recognised certifications, from:

- Junior Fireman Certificate
- Various graded examinations
- Diploma in Fire Engineering Technology

These were widely respected among practitioners and municipalities.

Collectively, these systems provided a comprehensive though fragmented ecosystem for firefighter training and officer development across South Africa.

# THE SHIFT TO DEMOCRATIC LEGISLATION AND THE EMERGING QUALIFICATION CRISIS

**After 1994, South Africa fundamentally** restructured its skills development system. The introduction of the:

- Skills Development Act (1998)
- South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Act (1995)
- National Qualifications Framework (NQF)
- Local Government SETA (LGSETA)

ushered in a new era of regulated, accredited occupational qualifications.

Most sectors successfully transitioned to SAQA-aligned qualifications but the fire services did not. This created a structural misalignment between historic fire qualifications and the national skills development architecture.

# THE SHIFT TO DEMOCRATIC contin..

## 1. Unaccredited operational qualifications

Fire Fighter I, Fire Fighter II, Hazmat Awareness, and Hazmat Operations though still prescribed in the Municipal Staff Regulations of 2022 as minimum entry requirements are not registered with SAQA, lack NQF levels, and are not approved by SETA.

This makes them technically non-compliant qualifications in the national education system.

# THE SHIFT TO DEMOCRATIC CONT.

## 2. Officer-level qualification gaps

Similarly, the historical SAESI Higher Certificate, Diploma, and Advanced Diploma in Fire Technology do not have NQF alignment, creating barriers to promotion, salary progression, and succession planning.

The same applies to:

- IFE legacy qualifications

# THE SHIFT TO DEMOCRATIC CONT.

## 3. SAESI's agreement with Studio College

To begin addressing this crisis, SAESI has entered a landmark partnership with Studio College, an accredited institution capable of aligning officer-level qualifications to SAQA requirements. This arrangement greatly benefits new learners.

However, the major unresolved challenge remains:

How should municipalities and accrediting bodies recognise and convert pre-existing, legacy qualifications held by thousands of firefighters and officers?

This challenge now threatens recruitment pipelines, SETA funding access, and succession management.

# PROBLEM STATEMENT

The misalignment between historic fire qualifications and the post-1994 SAQA–NQF system has created a national service delivery and compliance crisis. Fire services cannot legally participate in SETA-funded learnerships, recruit against non-accredited qualifications, or promote officers holding legacy certificates.

This affects:

- workforce development
- institutional professionalism
- succession planning
- community safety outcomes

There is an urgent need to create a unified and legally compliant national fire training and qualification framework underpinned by SAQA and SETA standards.

# PROBLEM STATEMENT

Category	Qualifications	COPETENCY LEVELS
Learner Firefighter	Candidate Physical Ability Test (CPAT); • Grade 12; • Code: B Driver Licence Advantageous; • Physically and Mentally fit; • Medical Test NFPA 1582; and • No criminal record.	<b>Core Professional Competencies</b> Community and customer focus Problem solving Negotiation and influencing Resilience Communication Ethics and professionalisms <b>Functional Competencies</b> Firefighting Rescue operations Special operations (Hazmat, Urban Search and Rescue) Fire Safety and Prevention Safety and Welfare Emergency Medical Care Call Taking and Dispatch <b>Public Services Orientation Competencies</b> Interpersonal relationships Service Delivery Orientation Personal Competencies <b>Action and Customer Orientation</b> Resilience Change Readiness Cognitive ability Learning orientation Problem Solving <b>Management / Leadership Competencies</b> Impact and Influence Team Orientation Direction Setting Coaching and Mentoring
Firefighter I Firefighter II	Grade 12 or higher; • Firefighter I course; • Hazmat Awareness; • First Aid Level 3; • Code: EB Drivers Licence; • Physically and Mentally fit; • Medical Test NFPA 1582; and • No criminal record. Firefighter II • As per Firefighter I plus; Code C Drivers Licence; • Firefighter II course; • Hazmat Operational / Fire & Rescue; and • Relevant Firefighter Certificate	
Senior Firefighter Platoon Commander	Senior Firefighter • As per Firefighter II plus; • Pump Operator / Aerial Appliance qualification; • Fire Prevention course; • Fire Investigation; • Fire service instructor 1; • High Angle Rescue 1; • Higher Certificate in fire technology (fire services); and • Code C1 Drivers Licence Platoon Commander • As per Senior Firefighter plus; • Peace Officer Course; • Fire Officer I; and • Computer literacy: MS Office	
Station Commander Divisional Commander	Station Commander • Has come through the firefighter ranks and achieved up to platoon commander qualifications; plus • Relevant tertiary qualification, preferably a Diploma in Fire Technology; and • Computer literacy: MS Office Divisional Commander • Advances from Station Commander and has a relevant tertiary qualification, preferably a Diploma in Fire Technology. Computer literacy: MS Office	
Assistant Chief Fire Officer Deputy Chief Fire Officer Chief Fire Officer	Assistant Chief Fire Officer, • Advances from a divisional commander and has a relevant tertiary qualification, preferably a Diploma in Fire Technology as well as relevant managerial experience. Deputy Chief Fire Officer & Chief Fire Officer • Relevant tertiary qualification, preferably a Diploma or Bachelor Degree in Fire Technology as well as relevant managerial experience. • Computer literacy: MS Office	

# PROBLEM STATEMENT

QUALIFICATION	UNIT STANDARD	NQF LEVEL	CUSTODIAN
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Grade 12;</li> </ul>		NQF Level 4	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Firefighter I course;</li> <li>Firefighter II course;</li> <li>Hazmat Awareness;</li> <li>Hazmat Operational</li> <li>First Aid Level 3;</li> <li>Fire &amp; Rescue</li> </ul>	None None None None		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Diploma in Fire Technology; and</li> <li>Computer literacy: MS Office literacy: MS Office</li> </ul>	100988	NQF Level 6	TUT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bachelor Degree in Fire Technology</li> <li>B-Tech In fire Technology</li> <li>Advance Diploma in Fire Technology</li> </ul>	72406	NQF Level 7	TUT
	111619	NQF Level 7	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Basic Firefighting</li> </ul>	12484	NQF Level 4	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Diploma in Fire Technology</li> </ul>	100988	NQF Level 6	TUT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Basic Fire Fighting 2-day course</li> </ul>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Basic fire fighting course</li> </ul>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Further Education and Training Certificate: Fire and Rescue Operations</li> </ul>	57803		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Perform basic fire fighting</li> </ul>	12484	NQF Level 2	SGB Manufacturing and Assembly Processes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Diploma in Fire Technology</li> </ul>	100988	NQF Level 6	Tshwane University of Technology (TUT)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Occupational Certificate: Firefighter</li> </ul>	98991	NQF Level 4	Development Quality Partner - LG SETA (Services)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Further Education and Training Certificate: Fire and Rescue Operations</li> </ul>	57803	NQF Level 4	SGB Fire and Rescue)

# FIRE QUALIFICATION SAQA DATABASE

NQF Sub-Framework	Qual ID	Qualification Title	NQF Level	Main credits	Registration date end	Originator	Field	Subfield
QOSF	21127	Preliminary Certificate: Institute of Fire Engineers	Level TBA: Pre-2009 was L4	120	31-Dec-16		6	Engineering and Related Design
QOSF	98991	Occupational Certificate: Firefighter	NQF Level 04	149	30-Jun-23	DQP LGSETA	11	Cleaning, Domestic, Hiring, Property and Rescue Services
QOSF	64390	National Certificate: Emergency Services Supervision: Fire and Rescue Operations	Level TBA: Pre-2009 was L5	130	30-Jun-23	SGB F&R	11	Cleaning, Domestic, Hiring, Property and Rescue Services
QOSF	79246	Further Education and Training Certificate: Wild Land Fire Fighting	NQF Level 04	140	30-Jun-15	TT 1 FWT	1	Forestry and Wood Technology
QOSF	57803	Further Education and Training Certificate: Fire and Rescue Operations	NQF Level 04	148	30-Jun-23	SGB F&R	11	Cleaning, Domestic, Hiring, Property and Rescue Services
QOSF	86646	Further Education and Training Certificate: Electronic Security Installation Practices: Fire Detection Equipment	NQF Level 04	136	30-Jun-12	Generic Provider - Field 08	8	Safety in Society

# METHODOLOGY

## This paper uses:

- desktop research
- legislative analysis
- policy document review
- thematic analysis of institutional frameworks

Sources include legislation, municipal regulations, SAESI historical documents, SETA frameworks, the National Fire Services Framework, and NDMC/COGTA policy instruments.

# DISCUSSION: TOWARDS A MODERN, ACCREDITED FIRE SERVICES TRAINING SYSTEM

## 1. Establishing a National Fire Academy

A National Fire Academy should be established under NDMC oversight to:

- register all fire qualifications with SAQA,
- align all curricula with SETA requirements,
- deliver accredited training,
- standardise assessment and certification.

Regional academies will support access and uniformity.



# DISCUSSION: TOWARDS A MODERN CONT.

## 2. Registering All Fire Qualifications

All qualifications — from Fire Fighter I to Advanced Fire Technology — must be formally registered with SAQA, including short courses such as:

- Pump Operator
- Fire Instructor
- Rescue Technician
- Incident Command

Registration will unlock SETA grants and ensure qualification legitimacy.



# Discussion: Towards a Modern cont.

## 3. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) for Legacy Officers

A national RPL initiative is needed to convert legacy SAESI and IFE certificates into NQF-aligned qualifications, preventing disenfranchisement of the existing workforce.

# DISCUSSION: TOWARDS cont.

## 4. Integrating Professional Development and Leadership

### Training must integrate:

- leadership development
- ethics
- community risk reduction
- disaster risk management
- strategic fire service management

This supports professionalisation and aligns with the transformational goals of local government

# DISCUSSION: TOWARDS cont.

## 5. Strengthening Partnerships

Collaboration is critical between:

- SAESI
- LGSETA
- Higher Education Institutions
- NDMC
- Municipal fire academies

A Fire Services Education and Training Council (FSETC) is recommended to coordinate standards, accreditation, and quality assurance.

# EXPECTED OUTCOMES

**Implementing the proposed framework will result in:**

- SAQA-registered fire qualifications at all levels.
- SETA-approved training, unlocking funding and learnerships.
- A fully accredited National Fire Academy.
- RPL pathways for legacy qualifications.
- Improved recruitment and promotion pipelines.
- Professionalised fire services capable of meeting modern risks.
- Sustainable community protection through a skilled and accredited workforce.

# CONCLUSION

South Africa stands at a critical turning point in the transformation of fire services. Without accredited, standardised, and professionally recognised training pathways, municipalities cannot build or sustain capable firefighting and fire safety teams. The establishment of a unified, SAQA-aligned fire training framework is essential for protecting communities, improving service delivery, and fulfilling constitutional mandates.

A National Fire Academy, full qualification registration, and RPL for legacy officers will bridge the historic gaps and usher in a new era of professional, accredited, and sustainable fire services in South Africa.