The role of the South African qualifications authority in curbing misrepresentation of qualifications

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to analyse the role of the South African Qualifications Authority in curbing misrepresentation of qualifications. Academic degrees are highly valued throughout the globe because they are seen as a dependable and trusted proxy for the bearers' knowledge, abilities and skills. In the same vein, the higher education system in South Africa makes every effort to generate well-qualified graduates who are capable of assisting in the leadership of the country's socio-economic growth. Recent reports in the media, on the other hand, create the impression that this initiative is being hampered by the widespread use of counterfeit, phoney and other illegitimate credentials. Consequently, the reputation of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) is in grave danger as a result of the increasing prevalence of dishonestly misrepresented qualifications in both the public and private sectors. The education system is also at risk of losing its credibility as a result of actions involving deception, which is a subject that has to be addressed at the highest levels possible. Notably, the public service in South Africa is making significant progress towards the goal of ensuring that individuals who misrepresent their qualifications are barred from ever working in the public sector again. In this regard, SAQA plays an important role by offering verification services to individuals who are interested in applying for jobs in the public sector. Thus, this study contributes to the literature on credentialism and qualifications from the developing world with specific reference to South Africa.

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Introduction

In recent years, South African news outlets have revealed several cases of qualification fraud. It has been shown that the public sector is the source of many of these exposed incidents. This calls into question the effectiveness of the vetting processes used to hire public sector employees (BUSINESSSTECH, 2015). These concerns are brought up in light of the fact that it is estimated that South African taxpayers spend more than R400 billion annually on an over-extended public sector. Cutting the public service pay bill and restoring the civil service's credibility should start with getting rid of those who misrepresented their credentials (Coetzer, 2019). Due to the high number of persons who have matriculation degrees, the South African Qualifications Authority's (SAQA) verification programme, which compares qualifications to the National Learners' Records Database, found that school-leaving certificates are the biggest category needing verification. School-leaving certificates are also the most fraudulently obtained qualification (41%), followed by diplomas (13%) and degrees (32%) (Gernetzky, 2015).

A notable 39,144 individuals' credentials, totalling 60,463 qualifications, were confirmed by SAQA during the 2012–2013 fiscal year. During this period, it was found that 0.8% of the people vetted misrepresented their qualifications. The 2013-2014 verification of 28,842 records found a lower percentage (0.4%) of fraudulent qualifications. Yet, the verification of 11,559 qualifications that was conducted in the period running from April to August 2015 produced 0.6% of forgeries (Gernetzky, 2015). Even though these figures are not alarmingly high, they are still a cause for concern since this should not be happening at all.

The integrity of the South African education system is at peril as it runs the risk of losing its credibility via deception, thus this issue has to be handled at the highest levels. It is gratifying to see that the South African public service is making tremendous efforts to
ensure that persons who falsely claimed their credentials are barred from future employment in the public sector. Currently, most employers depend on SAQA’s effectiveness since it is crucial to the process of verifying job applications (Jimu, 2018). In several African nations, there is an increasing tendency of educational misrepresentation. A higher education credential does in fact have a genuine monetary worth. It is widely acknowledged that migration and worker and student mobility are important factors in determining how individuals grow. In 2013, SAQA presented a report at an international conference on counterfeiting qualification misrepresentation that identified 137 forgeries that were proven to have been used in foreign qualification assessments conducted between July 2012 and June 2013 (SAQA, 2014). Whilst the overall number may be small, SAQA records show a rise in fraudulent foreign credentials during the first quarter of the 2014–2015 fiscal year.

The rising incidence of degree falsification threatens the significance of qualification as an indication of an employee's capabilities. While both the purchase and sale of fraudulent credentials are illegal, both the demand and supply of these papers are on the increase. According to Statistics SA, South Africa's unemployment rate increased to 27.1 percent in the third quarter of 2016, from 26.6 percent in the previous period, hitting its highest level since 2004. The number of jobless roses by 239,000 to reach 5,873,000 and the number of employed persons reached 21.7 million, an increase of 288 thousand over the previous quarter (Statistic SA, 2016). In recent years, the South African government and state-owned companies have been beset with scandals involving qualification misrepresentation that have reached the highest executive levels. The significant rise over the last five years pertains to credentials that have been discovered to be forged, invalid or inconsistent. This includes credentials that have been acquired, changed or simply added to a CV without any physical or written documentation (Koko, 2022).

This study aims to analyse the role of the South African Qualifications Authority in curbing misrepresentation of qualifications. Academic degrees are highly valued throughout the globe because they are seen as a dependable and trusted proxy for the bearers' knowledge, abilities and skills.

This study adopted a non-empirical approach to collecting information from secondary sources. A plethora of databases were used in order to gather information related to the misrepresentation of qualifications in South Africa and the role that the South African Qualifications Authority plays. The researchers made use of different permutations of fake and false qualifications-related terms in order to optimise the web search and gain access to material from journals and other internet-based sources. The results of the search yielded a collection of publications that are representative of the major body of research on this topic. This information has been used to construct an argument regarding the extent of misrepresentation of qualifications in South Africa and to generate a few case studies to support the narrative.

The Extent of the Misrepresentation of Qualifications in South Africa

A degree, regardless of how it was earned, is seen as a passport to the high life. Academic credentials are held in high regard around the globe and as such, they are seen as a dependable and trustworthy proxy for the knowledge, abilities and skills of their bearers (OECD, 2001). In light of this, the higher education system in South Africa makes every effort to generate graduates who can contribute to the country's socio-economic progress. However, recent media reports imply that this endeavour is being hampered by the rise of counterfeit, falsified and other illegitimate and illegally obtained academic and professional accolades. On average, around 13 percent of validated degrees are found to be somewhat bogus. Frequently, the symbols are altered to represent a better grade, or topics for which the student never enrolled are added. In many instances, degrees and certificates are blatant forgeries, with many originating from degree mills in the United States that, for a few hundred dollars, create almost flawless forgeries of degrees (IOL, 2013). There is a link between educational achievement and employment, economic security and affluence, according to research (Amaral and Magalhaes, 2004). Thus, higher education credentials are seen as a sort of valuable personal property that offers benefits over those without them by indicating the holder's probable competency in job scenarios (Noah and Eckstein, 2001).

In six of the nine provinces, more than fifty percent of the employed had a level of education below matriculation. Limpopo, the Eastern Cape and North West had the lowest percentage of employed individuals with matric or a higher degree of education, whilst Gauteng, the Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal had the highest proportions. According to Statistics SA (2016), 58.8 percent of jobless individuals had less than a matriculation certificate, followed by 32.4% having a matriculation certificate. Therefore, the likelihood of persons misrepresenting their credentials is significant. A high-school diploma doubles the likelihood of getting work, whereas a bachelor's degree quadruples the likelihood.

While individuals may feel comfortable embellishing their resumes to improve their employment prospects, claiming an unearned certification is fraudulent. This current controversy on false credentials follows many scandals involving prominent government officials and executives from state-owned companies.

Some of the biggest fake degree scandals in South Africa reported in the media

In a state-owned enterprise known as the Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa (PRASA), the then head of engineering, Daniel Mthimkulu, oversaw the development of the Afro 4000 locomotives. Reports immediately surfaced challenging the fitness of the locomotives for the local environment. Thus, Mthimkulu's claims that he held a degree in engineering from a German institution could not be confirmed, Prasa conducted an investigation. It was discovered that Mthimkulu had lied about his credentials and was not registered as an engineer. They were forced to terminate his employment after employing him for 63 months from 2010 and
paying him almost R15 million. The collapse of the Afro 4000 project resulted in the loss of billions of rand (Bateman, 2015; Koko, 2022).

Similarly, South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) chairman Ellen Tshabalala claimed to have a Bachelor of Commerce and a master's degree from the University of South Africa (UNISA). The Mail & Guardian revealed that Tshabalala lacked the credentials she claimed to possess and that she had failed the majority of her UNISA courses. On December 17, 2014, Tshabalala resigned as chair of the SABC. On the political front, former South African cabinet member Pallo Jordan claimed to have earned a PhD from the London School of Economics. Pallo Jordan held the positions of Minister of Post, Telecommunications and Broadcasting and Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism. Dr. Jordan obtained a graduate degree from the London School of Economics, according to Jordan's curriculum vitae. The Sunday Times revealed that Jordan had no official academic degrees. He later apologised and resigned from Parliament and the governing party's national executive committee (Van Onselen, 2014). Moreover, former Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, Sicelo Shiceka, claimed to hold a Master of Arts Degree in Political Economics from the University of the Free State. The Mail & Guardian reported in 2010 that this was false and that he was not even in the process of obtaining the degree, as his representative had previously stated (SAPA, 2011).

Credentialism

Credentialism often refers to an employer's excessive dependence on a college degree while making hiring choices. Credentialist theory posits that because employers operate under widely held societal assumptions about formal education, they do not use educational credentials effectively in hiring decisions and, as a result, make decisions that are irrational, unreflective, and at least potentially counter-productive. Employers assume that formal education generates more productive workers, but empirical data does not support this notion. In fact, a number of studies have shown an inverse correlation between employee productivity and formal schooling (Gatenby, 2015). Credentialist theory does not propose that production and education are disconnected or that schooling imparts no abilities. The idea instead states that the association between production and education is less than the correlation between remuneration and education. One can often recall occasions when a university-educated individual was not the ideal candidate for a certain profession (Collins, 2019).

The Credentialism theory outlines the ideology in which academic credentials are seen as giving information about a person's skills, aptitudes or the traits required to execute jobs, get prestige, or hold elite positions (Boundless, 2014). Employers place a higher value on a certificate than on the abilities themselves, resulting in a vicious cycle that necessitates additional degrees. Employers feel that education develops potential workers, and by hiring someone with a more advanced degree than is required, they obtain more return for their investment (Garwe, 2015). Similarly, according to the Human Capital Theory, companies depend on academic credentials to screen, categorise and evaluate the competence, efficiency and productivity of prospective workers. This attitude is founded on the notion that the higher the degree of academic qualification, the better the talents, skills, expertise, dependability and devotion of the employee. This belief stems from the fact that the labour market wants academic certificates as a means of assuring knowledge and abilities (Collins, 2019).

Economic Theories: Relationship between Educational Attainment and Subsequent Higher Earnings

Economists and social scientists have examined the link between occupations and educational qualifications and created several hypotheses to show a correlation between educational achievement and socio-economic success. While these theories agree that there is a positive association between degree achievement and greater wages, they distinguish between the abilities acquired by university degree holders and the talents that employers assume a degree conveys (Bills, 1988). Becker (1962) introduced the Human Capital Theory which, in contrast to Credentialism, posits that an individual's investment in education and training results in a higher value of human capital and higher worker productivity, allowing the worker to eventually command a higher income and other valued benefits. According to this notion, education teaches appropriate talents and skills for effective work performance.

The contrast between the Human Capital Theory and screening/signaling theories is that the former asserts that education increases productivity, whilst screening/signaling theories state that education is primarily used to find productive individuals (Sun & Wang, 2014). In a world of incomplete knowledge, education identifies people who are intrinsically more productive, rather than imparting productivity-enhancing skills. Due to systematic racism and sexism, as well as other political, economic and social issues, many productive individuals are unable to attend college. This is an evident weakness in the argument.

The Proliferation of Fake Degrees

There has been nothing short of a revolution in the world of higher education as a result of the changes brought about by advancements in information technology, namely the capacity to give instruction over the internet. Many students who otherwise would not have been able to receive higher education are now able to do so as a result of the proliferation of this technology, which has opened up access to education on a far larger scale (Noble, 2012). At the same time, the Internet has developed into a haven for non-traditional education providers. These providers range from diploma mills, which are unscrupulous organisations that simply sell bogus or counterfeit degrees, to online schools that actually provide some education but lack any accreditation that is recognised by education departments or quality assurers. Therefore, email messages that promise diploma degrees are enticing to certain people, especially
those who feel that they are already competent but think companies are unjustly rejecting them for employment opportunities or raises because they do not have university degrees (Guernsey, 1997). Before the 1990s, “distance learning” was effectively the same thing as correspondence education, which was transmitted via the now-antiquated medium of the postal service. A student would pick up an envelope and subsequently return it to the sender with the course finished. For the purpose of providing remote education, conventional institutions of higher education make extensive use of such cutting-edge technology as the Internet, personal computers and fibre optic cable (Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2013). Sadly, the advent of a new age in the supply of bogus degrees coincided with the meteoric rise in popularity of the Internet and the widespread use of email.

Degree Mills: The Profitable Industry

Since the eleventh century, fraudulent credentials have been identified (Murray & Burns, 2012). Bear (1982) stated that there were around 168-degree mills worldwide before the Internet age. By 2003, this number had risen to more than 400 degree mills and around 390 fraudulent schools with an estimated annual turnover of over $500 million (Armour, 2003; Bear and Bear, 2003). More recently, a report by Cohen and Winch (2011) identified 1 762 fake institutions and 1 545 suspicious ones around the globe. Jonbekova (2020) asserts that the relationship between education and job stability drives the global demand for higher education credentials. Consequently, organisations and people who specialise in selling phoney credentials to naive clients and criminals who are motivated to obtain academic credentials easily thrive (Noble, 2012; Garwe, 2015). This open market for fraudulent credentials and the associated profits have fostered the growth of intricate multinational networks of counterfeit institutions posing as authentic organisations (Epstein 2010; Gollin et al., 2014). The phrase ‘degree mill’ refers to a dubious person or institution that often operates online and awards degrees or certificates for a fee without demanding the rigorous proof of learning abilities required by legitimate universities (Cohen and Winch, 2011). The operating procedures of these businesses vary. Some may ask potential applicants to submit their profiles and enable them to pick the desired qualification, and even recommend the year the qualification was obtained. These fictitious institutions sell more than simply MBAs and bachelor's degrees needed to get entry-level employment. Doctors, legislators, academics and engineers are also served by degree mills, since they all took a short-cut by claiming a degree they had not obtained. It is a really unsettling narrative, not only due to the magnitude of the issue (Clifton, Chapman & Cox, 2018). The ethical composure of individuals who employ degree mills is chillingly shown by their seemingly innocent justifications. Even someone with little understanding of the genuine higher education industry should be able to recognise the red flags of a degree mill. People with an IQ over room temperature must suspect that a doctorate (PhD) gained in two weeks with no questions asked or a bachelor's degree that can be back-dated to a date of one's choosing cannot be real (Elongue, 2015).

Employees with fraudulent degrees believe that they are skilled employees, and others either consciously or mistakenly affirm this view. Consumers are told by bogus degree suppliers that they have earned the degrees because their life experiences, including job and other educational experiences, merit academic credit (Ezell and Bear, 2005). These persons are complicit in the fraud. When presented with proof that they have claimed an invalid credential, they make excuses and defences, but ultimately, according to Ezell and Bear (2005), virtually everyone knows or should have known that there is an issue. The tale of a South African diplomat who allegedly had a PhD from La Salle University lends credence to Ezell and Bear's contention. When it came out that the institution was re-selling degrees and other academic credentials online, it was forced to shut in 1996. The ambassador expressed regret for misrepresenting his or her credentials on the CV (SAPA, 2015).

The SABC case serves as another illustration to support the contention made by Ezell and Bear (2005). According to section 182(1)(b) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, and section 8(1) of the Public Protector Act, 1994, the South African Public Protector published a report in February 2014 titled “When Governance and Ethics Fail” on the investigation into claims of administrative error, systemic corporate governance shortcomings, abuse of power and the erroneous appointment of Mr. Hlaudi Motsoeneng by the SABC. According to the Public Protector, “The COO committed an act of egregious false misrepresentation of facts by stating that he was in possession of a matriculation certificate received from Metisimantsho High School in Qwaqwa. In contrast, Mr. Motsoeneng blamed a Mrs. Swanepoel, who he said handed him the application form, and revealed during his taped interview that he had fabricated his matric credentials.

He claimed that she had given him the form to fill with whatever he needed to get the job. When filling the application form for one of the complainants, the COO claimed to have passed Standard 10 (matriculation) in 1991 at the age of 23 and listed five (5) symbols he claimed to have attained in this respect (Public Protector SA, 2014). In addition to the buyers and sellers, Ezell and Bear (2005) point out two more groups that guarantee the survival of degree mills. First off, companies that demand degrees but do not bother to check if they are valid play a big part. Without companies’ inadequate oversight of personnel and applicants, the market for degree-mill schemes would not be as profitable. The government and the regulatory community make up the second group, but neither has taken the issue seriously.

Different types of fraudulent documents

When given by a body legally authorised to provide such awards, an academic qualification, award or recognition is considered legitimate or valid (Moore, 2009). The National Qualifications Framework and all qualifications earned in South Africa are in line thanks to the South African Qualifications Authority, the country’s only regulatory organisation. Degrees and diplomas may be offered by the Department of Higher Education under a Parliamentary Act. After the university senate receives evaluations from
competent academics and certifies that the student has met the basic standards and expectations in a subject, the student is awarded authentic credentials. The following list of five prevalent categories of forged papers is provided by Decoo (2002):

i. **Degree or diploma mills:** These produce and market fake credentials to customers who have not really completed the ostensible education;

ii. **Fabricated or Counterfeit Papers:** These are fabricated or counterfeit documents that serve as a symbol for a real or fictional programme or organisation;

iii. **Modified Papers:** Authentic, official documents may have changes made to them, such as omissions and additions. Changes might be made to the candidate's name, enrolment and graduation dates, grades, course content and date of birth, amongst other things;

iv. **Internally produced:** Staff members of the institution create these fictitious papers. Although they may be altered or manufactured, they always appear on real paper with official seals, stamps and the required signatures. The norm is for degrees to be granted for programmes that were not completed and for grades to be inflated; and

v. **Translations:** These are papers that have been incorrectly translated in an effort to mislead and misrepresent them. It is common practice to modify grades and course names to correspond to those in the recipient nation (Decoo, 2002).

### Building a culture of Academic Integrity

Although cheating is common, it has evolved through time in terms of both character and physical appearance (Gallant, 2008). The characteristics of cheating include both the perceptions of cheating and the look and manner of cheating. History demonstrates that the nature of cheating evolves in lockstep with changes in the methods used to teach and evaluate students, changes that have been primarily brought about by the rise in the student-faculty ratio as well as the introduction of the Internet and other technology. For instance, it was difficult to cheat on oral recitation examinations, which were the norm in colonial colleges at the time. When written papers started to be used as a method of evaluation, students had the chance to steal other people's ideas. Then came written exams, when students may copy from a neighbour or use unapproved tools to cheat. Therefore, cheating has evolved through time in both character and perception. According to research, cheating is now just morally uncomfortable rather than morally abhorrent (Davis, Drinan & Bertram Gallant, 2009). This is particularly true for actions like plagiarising or duplicating work from others while working on individual tasks. Many students either see these actions as minor instances of cheating or fail to identify them as cheating at all (McCabe, 2005).

The educational system has not responded to the rising chances and temptations to cheat that appear to result from changes in the educational system, society and technology throughout time by placing more emphasis on educating students about ethics and ethical behaviour (Gallant, 2010). The little ethics teaching that is now offered in schools is sometimes restricted to the Philosophy department or even to just one ethics course. McCabe, Trevino and Butterfield (2001) noted that despite research showing that males cheat more often than women (McCabe and Trevino, 1997; Roig and Caso, 2005), the inequalities between men and women seem to be "eroding with time". Concerns about the reliability of University of Zululand credentials were raised by media allegations from 2016 about a "Degrees-for-sale fraud" at the institution that allegedly began as early as 2008. These claims brought to light the university's academic and administrative staff's lack of morals and unethical behaviour. The first report named academics and administrative personnel (Cowen, 2016).

### The Role of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA)

When looking for information on credentials, exams, learning routes and employment prospects after the qualification was earned, the general public had little choice but to depend on the material given by providers and career advisory agencies prior to the year 1994. Before the South African Qualifications Authority Act of 1995 came into effect, the procedure that was used to decide qualifications was kept secret from the public (SAQA, 2014). Due to, fly-by-night businesses were given the opportunity to develop. There was no comprehensive structure in place throughout the country to guarantee the validity of credentials. Existing credentials are allowed to be registered on the NQF thanks to a provision that was included in the SAQA Act. However, in order for these qualifications to be registered, they have to fulfil certain requirements. The public was made aware by virtue of this registration that the qualification had been subjected to quality assurance and was in accordance with the criteria of the NQF (SAQA, 2014). The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) came into being in 1995 as a result of the passage of the SAQA Act, which was also the very first piece of post-apartheid education and training legislation to be approved in a democratic South Africa. In succeeding years, the SAQA Act was superseded by the NQF Act of 2008, which further bolstered the function of SAQA whilst also instituting forward-thinking modifications to the NQF's initial blueprint (SAQA, 2014).

### SAQA and the National Qualifications Framework (NQF)

In accordance with the Constitution, the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) was formed in South Africa as part of the post-1994 post-apartheid reconstruction of the nation as a way to integrate a racially segregated and unequal education and training system. It served as a way to bridge the gap between the status of various types of learning, including academic learning, experiential learning, education, training and indigenous knowledge, that was caused by differences in class. Small segments of the population in 1994 had access to the most effective portions of the system, while the remainder had to negotiate institutions of diverse quality without any
common framework for system mapping. From the beginning, the South African NQF aspired to create a single, integrated system that would improve all learners in the nation's access, redress, mobility and system quality and transparency (SAQA: 2014).

The South African NQF is a single integrated education and training system that is composed of three distinct and coordinated NQF Sub-Frameworks, as per the NQF Act 67 of 2008. Its goals are to: establish a single, cohesive national framework for learning achievements; make educational, training and career paths more accessible; improve the calibre of instruction; and hasten the elimination of previous unfair discrimination in educational, training and employment opportunities. The NQF's goals are created to support both the overall social and economic growth of the country, as well as the complete personal development of each student. The NQF is connected with correcting current unjust discrimination as well as preventing it in the future (SAQA, 2014). The different NQF levels each indicate a certain type of academic achievement that a student may achieve during their academic career. The NQF system for the South African education sector is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: National Qualifications Framework for South Africa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NQF Framework/ Quality Council</th>
<th>NQF Level</th>
<th>NQF Sub-Framework and Qualification Type</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General Education Qualifications Framework and Qualification Type (GFETQSF)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Doctoral Degree (Professional)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Master’s Degree (Professional)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Bachelor Honours Degree (Professional)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree Diploma</td>
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<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Diploma Certificate</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Higher Certificate</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>National certificate</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Intermediate Certificate</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Elementary Certificate</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>General Certificate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: South African Technology Network (2017)

Promoting genuine qualifications in South Africa through effective Verification and Vetting

Recent media reports in South Africa revealed a few high-profile instances of credentials being falsified. Such examples would have been discovered at the beginning of recruitment if qualification screening was systematic and efficient. Despite the fact that there are just a few instances, failing to address them might be seen as a breach in the quality assurance system, which could lower the value of certifications overall (SAPA, 2015; Koko, 2022). Many people have the impression that Africa is a poor, disease-ridden place in need of outside development and assistance. Furthermore, African nations have achieved average annual GDP growth percentages ranging between 6.8 percent and 8.1 percent since 2011, according to a study of the world's 10 fastest-growing economies. By 2050, it is predicted that one-fourth of the world's population would reside in Africa, and this expansion in GDP is backed by new sources of capital investment in African development (Paice, 2022). Therefore, ensuring that Africans have access to highly valued credentials is crucial in order to maximise this investment and realise the potential of the continent's population. These problems emphasise how crucial it is for the African continent to guarantee that the calibre of its educational institutions is beyond reproach. When a nation provides programmes to develop rare talents or high-quality education, it must be able to certify the calibre of such credentials. The procedure is based on verification—evaluating the legitimacy of the granting institution and the certificate, the validity of the supporting documents, and the applicant’s identity—but it also involves comparison, or identifying a qualification that is equivalent in the local environment. The North-West University was hired by SAQA in 2014 to conduct an environmental scan of qualification verification across the African continent with an emphasis on the laws and customs that enable it. To find out how they handle shady credentials, 40 higher education institutions in Africa were randomly chosen. Despite the existence of several policy papers, the research showed that just five African nations seemed to have established systems for the authentication of foreign credentials (du Plessis, Vermeulen, van der Walt, and Maekela, 2015).

The role of the Media and other Verification bodies

The results of previous research show proof that the media sensationalises insignificant topics for commercial goals. According to Shapiro (2013), the percentage of incorrect interpretations of credentials is far lower than the 15–20 percent that is allegedly the case according to verification organisations. In the midst of all of this, SAQA, which is the genuine organisation, was never asked for their opinion on any of the high-profile instances that were highlighted in the media. The only criticisms that were carried in the
media were those from other verification agencies, all of which are profitable due to the model of their company. The other verification organisations purchase their source information from the institution, but SAQA has direct access to the databases of the three quality councils. This research identified and observed via observation data two distinct practices, one of which is the misrepresentation of credentials, and the other is the fraudulent use of qualifications. In accordance with the principles of common law, a person who has been the victim of fraud is required to take legal action.

The Causes and Consequences

When it is revealed that a person has been employed on the basis of phoney credentials, this may result in criminal prosecution and have a negative impact on the reputation of the offender, the employer and the overall integrity of the higher education system. A former police colonel from KwaZulu-Natal who used a forged matric certificate to get a job in the South African Police Service (SAPS) was recently found guilty of fraud and forgery and sentenced to five years in prison by the Durban Regional Court. The conviction stems from the fact that the colonel lied about his educational background in order to get the job (Evans, 2019). As the sentence was being handed down, the magistrate said that it was the responsibility of the court to dispel the impression that white-collar crime, which is prevalent in today’s society, is less severe than other types of criminal activity. The investigation conducted by the magistrate revealed that the former law enforcement officer had not passed his matriculation examinations in 1985 and had subsequently attempted and failed additional examinations the following year in 1986. However, the magistrate also found that the former cop, who was a police spokesperson, had misrepresented himself when applying for promotion to a senior position while already being employed by the SAPS. The position required a matric certificate, and the magistrate found that the former cop had applied for the promotion whilst already being employed by the SAPS. Additionally, the court found the former police spokesperson guilty of fraud for having presented the same counterfeit matric diploma to UNISA in order to gain entrance to a National Diploma in Police Administration programme (Barbeau & Pillay, 2015).

Collaboration and International Agreements

International collaboration is important to curb the practice of fraudulent qualifications misrepresentation. In Africa, SAQA hired North-West University to conduct a desktop study on existing verification rules and procedures in several parts of the African continent. Botswana, Ghana, Malawi, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Cameroon, Kenya, Namibia, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Lesotho, Nigeria, Zambia and Gabon were all mentioned as African nations from whom SAQA and South Africa get the majority of their qualification’s evaluations. Research, evaluation and identification of regional and continental trends in qualification verification policies and practices, as well as commonalities, differences, best practices and challenges in African qualification verification policies and practices, were the main objectives of this project (du Plessis, Vermeulen, van der Walt, and Maekela, 2015). Thus, academic cooperation within and across regions is a need for higher education that must be met as part of the process of internationalisation. Africa’s Qualifications Verifications Network (AQVN) was founded and spear-headed by the leadership of SAQA. With the adoption of the Groningen Declaration on Digital Student Data Depositories Worldwide recently, there has been an increase in international cooperation in higher education (SAQA, 2020).

Conclusion

This study sought to analyse the role of the South African Qualifications Authority in curbing misrepresentation of qualifications. It is evident that in South Africa, there are limited cases of consequences for people who take the bait offered by degree mills and those who knowingly engage in qualification forgery. This also brings into question the values and ethical conduct of academic staff because, to a certain extent, academic staff act as a conduit in exacerbating this phenomenon.

The results of a literature search also reveal that the SAQA cannot overcome this problem alone. Employers must establish systems to verify and conduct a thorough vetting of qualifications in the public and private sectors. In this way, South Africa will be stepping in the right direction to flush out fake qualifications. In general, the discussion on the literature review demonstrates the important role that SAQA plays in keeping qualification records and verifying foreign qualifications. It also highlighted the need to have a more coordinated regional body to deal with industrialisation and cross-border employment. This review highlights the significance of the ethical conduct of academic staff. This literature review furthermore reveals that there should be serious consequences for people that have misrepresented qualifications as this will deter society in general from taking shortcuts and obtaining fraudulent qualifications.

Acknowledgement

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.


Funding: This research received no funding

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to restrictions.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.
References


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