QUALIFICATION-LED CHANGE PROCESSES AND TURBULENT TIMES: THE UNFOLDING SOUTH AFRICAN STORY…

Ansa Liebenberg and Salim Akoojee
The manufacturing, engineering and related services SETA (merSETA)

Abstract

The idea of integration of education and training is as an especially powerful one in post-apartheid South Africa. However, the focus on qualifications, instead of institutions, as the major lever of reform, is not as straightforward as it appears (Young 2001). The notion of transformation and integration is underpinned by issues of redress, access and equality. Integral to this transformative thrust, is the need to include a workplace experience component to be undertaken in terms of qualifications. This was in essence intrinsic to the implementation of the National Qualification Framework (NQF), perceived to be a means by which to achieve seamless articulation between education and training, as well as between occupational, vocational and professional qualification development.

We claim that the notion of qualification-led change has not succeeded and that turbulent economic conditions merely highlight its shortcomings. Although a multitude of qualifications have been developed and registered on the NQF since its implementation, issues about the design of the qualifications (how they were developed) and how the training and assessment against these qualifications materialised, appear to have had a limited impact on access, redress, equality and recognition of workplace experience. Thus is it not surprising that qualification-led change has not effectively translated into real transformation. We suggest that the current political changes may provide opportunities to ensure that a very different and meaningful development path is forged.

1.1 Introduction

We argue that the possibility of qualification-led change created an idealistic hope for access, redress and equality after the first democratic elections in 1994 in South Africa. The hope materialised in the form of sophisticated education and training policies, as well as a National Qualification Framework (NQF) aimed at redress and the integration of education and training. In line with global developments, workplace learning also became a specific focus area in the broader context of an integrated education and training system. However, this leap of faith into transformation, did not take realities into account, neither were implementation issues fully considered. In reflection, qualification-led change, understood in relation to the NQF to construct learning, was intrinsically flawed from the outset.

Understanding learning, especially learning in the context of work, is a complex issue. World-wide there is a growing interest in understanding it more deeply. However, there are concerns about the implementation of workplace or occupational learning in relation to the broader notion of the integration of education and training. In South Africa some of these concerns are expressed by Walters (2009, p.2), also claiming that there is an estimated R150 billion per annum public and private sector spend on education and training per se.

Furthermore, the global economic down-turn has impacted severely on South Africa and specifically highlighted issues pertaining to the return on investment in education and training. With such a major financial contribution, it is critical to understand the complexities

of an integrated and seamless education and training system. The concept of such a system is nevertheless a highly contested one, where tension between and within education and training discourse communities continuously battle it out in power-knowledge struggles. In the process the transformative objectives, underpinning the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) in South Africa, are hampered. These objectives, outlined in the South African Qualifications Authority Act (SAQA Act) 58 of 1995, are:

- To create an integrated national framework for learning achievements;
- To give access to education and training, and to allow movement within and between qualifications and career paths;
- To improve the quality of education and training
- To help to redress past unfair discrimination in education, training and employment opportunities, and
- To contribute to the full personal development of each learner and the social and economic development of the nation at large.

Education and training initiatives drifted apart and the issue of access and the portability of credits, obtained through qualifications in the respective learning pathways, were generally not possible. The idea of qualification-led change became seriously disputed. By mid-2009, at the lowest curve of the turbulent economic downturn, the newly appointed Minister of Higher Education and Training therefore urged that an integrated education and training system should receive renewed attention. Minister Nzimande stated (2009, p.2) that the idea of an integrated approach to education and training at the post school level is back on the agenda once again. This new development poses challenges and opportunities that require our collective thinking and participation. The minister's plea has to be understood:

- In relation to the history and context of the South African NQF;
- The reasons why there was an initial emphasis on qualification-led change;
- Why the notion of qualification-led change has caused tensions that we now reflect on, and
- Introspectively look at ways to fulfil the transformative ideals of an integrated education and training system in South Africa.

1.2 The history and context of the South African NQF

In 1994 the National Training Board (NTB) published a preliminary report on a National Training Strategy Initiative. The lead thinkers were representatives from the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the National Training Board (NTB) task team. Recommendations included a single Ministry of Education and Training, with adult basic education as a defined stream leading into the main stream of a learning continuum. The central idea revolved around learning as a lifelong process, the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and qualifications to underpin learning in contexts that were not formally addressed by institutionalised education and training, specifically workplace learning. The notion of qualifications linked to learning outcomes of education and training was explicit; explained as 'clusters of credit-bearing units of learning', integrating knowledge and skills that could be applied and transferred to different context (NTBI Report 1994, pp.94-95).

The NTB's vision of a systems-wide integration of education and training was realised symbolically when the White Paper on Education and Training was published in March 1995 by the Minister of Education. The White Paper was introduced with a statement that education and training would be located within the national Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). However, Deacon and Parker (1999, p.59), in reflection on the history, refer to 'the romanticism of the social utopia of the RDP'. They also explain that the RDP was soon afterwards supplanted by the macro-economic lens of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy.

The White Paper nevertheless laid a foundation for the NQF as a proposed integrated system. The then Minister of Education, Professor Bengu (1995, p.2) explained in the introductory message that education and training were purposely coupled in the title of the White Paper. The vision of integration was endorsed by claiming that training is a vital part of many learning programmes administered in schools, teachers' colleges, technical colleges, technikons and universities. In further elaboration, it was stated that the Ministry of Education therefore had great interest in the training function, because of his own responsibilities. Education and training were also essential elements of human resource development. In this respect a relationship was drawn between human capital development, inclusive of education and training, and economic development.

Subsequent education and training policies specifically refer to the personal development of learners, as well as the social and economic development of the nation at large. In later years these concepts were also included in the purpose statements and the rationale of qualifications documents. Whether this could be regarded as rhetoric could be debated. The emphasis on human resource development is nevertheless of significance in terms of the global trends and claims that productivity can be enhanced through higher skills levels of the workforce. A further relationship is then claimed between productivity, economic growth and global competitiveness. Young (2001, pp.4-5) argues that it is increasingly recognised that countries, regardless of their history and stage of development, have to confront similar forces of globalisation and their impact on national economies. In the South African context, both the globalisation issues and the social development issues are referred to in policy development after 1994. Marais (1998, p.169) is nevertheless of the opinion that GEAR may have recognised the need to improve labour productivity, but the focus on training as a remedy, is at the risk of downplaying the ensemble of other factors that cause low productivity.

However, the most important aspect of the White Paper was the commitment of the African National Congress (ANC) to an integrated education and training system (Kraak 1999, pp.34-35). This claim aligns with Jansen's view (2001, p.44) that the White Paper was a generic document that framed the core values of the ANC and became the ideological steering force for education policy making and practice. It also gave official sanction to the enactment of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Act 58 of 1995, in which the ideology of the White Paper could be traced.

1.3 NQF implementation and tensions in the notion of qualification-led change

The SAQA Act 58 of 1995 gave SAQA the power to set up the NQF. The Ministers of Education and Labour were given joint custody of the process and of the NQF, but the twin custodianship evoked tension from the very beginning. French (2009, p.9) is of the opinion that there was only 'sufficient consensus for the need of a NQF, its prominence and its design'. This gives some indication of the NQF tensions that manifested from the outset.

Young (2001, p.25) argues that the idea of integration was an especially powerful one in post-apartheid South Africa, but the focus on qualifications, instead of institutions, as the major lever of reform, is not as straightforward as it appears. It may have created hope, especially in trade union circles, that there is indeed a ladder of opportunity for progression and promotion. A range of other factors, inclusive of an outcomes-based approach, could nevertheless impact on the ideal of a qualification-led system to drive change.

One of the complexities was the introduction of outcomes-based education and training (OBET) in 1996, prior to the enactment of the NQF. Jansen (1999, p.8) claims that the outcomes debate in the workplace was discussed in relation to equivalencies and outcome assessment at different NQF levels. Whether an outcomes-based approach was pedagogically fully internalised, was and still is, a bone of contention.

The outcomes-based discourse is of importance in that the intention was to shift away from narrow competency-based practices (Kraak 1999, Young 2001). A 'shift away' implies, as Young (2001, p.28) argues, a progressive reading of outcomes to allow space for knowledge content. This argument relates to an explanation by Kraak (1999, p.41) in what he terms 'an expanded definition of OBE', whereby the need for a much larger foundation of knowledge is required to develop multi-skilled workers who can be globally competitive. However, the question of knowledge in occupational qualifications tends to be avoided by focusing on a technicist 'competent performance in the workplace' viewpoint and the atomistic assessment of the performance. Deacon and Parker (1999, p.63) describe this approach to outcomes as instrumentalist and linked to sets of outcomes that are assessed against strictly observable criteria, normally associated with grading and appraisal.

In a related argument, Young (2001, p.29) cites Muller (2000) who claims that 'outcomes are either too narrowly described to take account of knowledge or too diffuse and difficult to asses'. In each case, knowledge content is lost and the intended social construction of knowledge is not necessarily embraced. Young (2001) and Muller's (2000) views align broadly to a similar critique in the NQF Consultative Document (Departments of Education and Labour 2003, p.7), which claims:

National standards (including qualifications) are described in terms of knowledge about quality practice or competence (including assessment criteria). National standards are meant to make explicit the knowledge of good practice that is implicit in, for example, the shop floor lathe operator, the professional physician or the academic historian.

The statement is qualified by the emphasis that learning resonates differently in education and workplace communities, and that the distinct purposes of the constituencies are not sufficiently recognised. The Departments of Education and Labour (2003, pp. 7-8) were of the view that National Standards Bodies (NSBs) and Standards Generating Bodies (SGBs) developed qualifications without the benefit of conceptual guidance on how the two forms of

learning might find distinct expression within a single framework. This requires some understanding of what is understood as worthwhile knowledge and how these understandings impact on qualification development, interpretation and implementation.

Opinions and beliefs are usually expressed as statements about reality. Mouton and Marais (1990, pp.3-8) claim that we may therefore define a statement as any sentence in which a knowledge claim relating to reality is made. We could, however, question whose reality is revealed and whose voices count, especially in participatory or stakeholder-driven processes, such as the NQF implementation and qualification-led processes. Consequently, statements are sentences in which identifiable epistemic claims are made. Henning et al. (2004, p.15) describe it as 'how we come to know' and how we inquire and view the world.

It soon became apparent that role players in the development and implementation of the NQF view the world differently, leading to the assumption that power struggles develop due to different conceptualisations of knowledge, and how knowledge is viewed and understood. Habermas (1972, pp.301-310) defines worthwhile knowledge and modes of understanding around three cognitive interests. He defines prediction and control as technical interest associated with positivism, which we term "instrumentalist" in citing Deacon and Parker (1999). Training, especially competency-based training is normally aligned with an instrumentalist view of knowledge. In the years prior to 1994 in South Africa, this was generally speaking how training was conceptualised and practiced.

The NQF and the new emphasis on outcomes brought about a marginal difference, whereby there was some attempt to look more pragmatically at how qualifications were developed, yet in the interpretation and implementation, a technicist or instrumentalist view could still maintain ingrained views of knowledge and practice. It is nevertheless important to understand a more pragmatic approach that may have manifested in qualification development, but not necessarily in practice. Following Habermas (1972, pp. 301-310), pragmatism could be regarded as a more practical interest in the interpretation of knowledge, which is then concerned with understanding and interpretation. Although qualification development may have steered in a more pragmatic direction, transformation is intrinsically about emancipatory knowledge and world views to seek ideological freedom concerned with praxis and providing true redress and lifelong learning opportunities.

However, ultimately it is about whose interest is at stake and it raises another question whether we have not just paid lip service to transformation? The notion of an integrated education and training system implies that transformation should be in the interest of the learners, participating in learning activities at various levels of the NQF. These learners should have opportunities to experience redress and to access lifelong learning, if the ideology of the NQF is executed with these emancipatory understandings manifesting in qualification development and the related education and training practices. It nevertheless appears that this has not been the case, hence the tensions within and between education and training communities. The question then remains, why could South Africans not fulfil their vision of a transformed and integrated education and training system? In reflection, we realised that qualifications per se cannot bring about change. It merely created false hope. So, where do we start to revisit our vision and the plea of the Minister of Higher Education and Training.

1.4 Looking forward

In view of the tensions explained above, Jansen (2009, p.260) refers to 'post-conflict pedagogy' and he argues that in a redress or post-conflict context we first have to make sense of the 'troubled knowledge' of those who were on different sides of a divided community. Sophisticated policies do not "*wash away the knowledge in the blood or troubled knowledge*" (own emphasis in italics). Should we want to engage with meaning, we have to come to terms with the deeply ingrained "troubled knowledge in the blood", before any transformation in constructing worthwhile knowledge can truly manifest, as more than an intellectual exercise in compliance with change initiatives. It is possible that 'troubled knowledge' may still have been carried through in the most powerful voices in the approach to qualification development and implementation. If we therefore want to revisit transformation, we have to deal with what could be considered, in Jansen's words, as troubled knowledge.

Furthermore, although we may claim that qualification-led change has not transpired as envisaged in education and training policies and in aim and objectives of the NQF, all has not been in vain. Qualification-led movements may have been less than ideal for education change, but it has also been suggested that such transformations may serve a productive purpose, at least within the ambit of better qualification development (Garraway 2005, p.106). In this respect Garraway (2005, p.106) raises the point that change, in reflection, should be about teaching and learning issues rather than the abstract design of qualifications and the NQF.

In closure, we regard fifteen years since 1994 as a steep learning curve. We realised that transformation lies much deeper than policy claims and that we have to revisit our own understandings of worthwhile knowledge and how it truly impacts on access, redress and equality. We also have to make meaning of the lessons we learnt in qualification-led processes to inform our desire to truly transform the South African education and training system. Only then can we start to engage with the integration of education and training for the full benefit of all the learners and the country as a whole. In looking back at how the South African story unfolds, we are also looking forward.

References

Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. (2000). *Research methods in education.*
(5th Ed.) London: Routledge Falmer.

Deacon, R. & Parker, B. (1999). Positively mystical: an interpretation of South
Africa's outcomes-based National Qualifications Framework. In J. Jansen. &
P. Christie, (Eds.), *Changing curriculum. Studies in outcomes-based*
education in South Africa (pp.59–75). Cape Town: Juta & Co Ltd.

Department of Education. (1995). *White Paper on Education and Training*. Draft

White Paper No. 1, 15 March 1995. Pretoria: Department of Education.

Department of Education and Department of Labour. (2003). *An interdependent National Qualifications Framework system. Consultative document.* Pretoria: Department of Education and Department of Labour.

French, E. (2009). *The NQF and its worlds.* Pretoria: SAQA

Garraway, J. (2005). The codification of local knowledge into learnerships. *Journal of Education,* (36), pp. 93-110. Habermas, J. (1972). *Knowledge and human interests.* London: Heinemann.

Henning, E., Van Rensburg, W. & Smit, B. (2004). *Finding your way in qualitative research.* Pretoria: Van Schaik Publishers.

Jansen, J. (2001). Rethinking education policy making in South Africa: symbols of change, signals of conflict. In Kraak, A. & M. Young, (Eds.), *Education in retrospect: policy and implementation since 1990* (pp.41–58). Pretoria: HSRC. London: Institute of Education, University of London.

Jansen, J. (2009). *Knowledge in the blood: confronting race and the apartheid past.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Kraak, A. (1999). Competing education and training policy discourses: a 'systematic' versus a 'unit standards' framework. In J. Jansen & P. Christie, (Eds.), *Changing curriculum studies on outcomes-based education in South Africa* (pp.21-40). Cape Town: Juta & Co Ltd.

Marias, H. (1998). *South Africa: limits to change – the political economy of transformation.* Cape Town: UCT Press.

Mouton, J. & Marais, H.C. (1990). *Basic concepts in the methodology of social science.* Pretoria: HSRC.

National Training Board Task Team. (1994). *A discussion document on a national training strategy initiative.* Pretoria: National Training Board.

Nzimande, B. (2009, August). T*he post-school education and training system: some issues of policy.* Public lecture at Wits School of Public and Developmental Management.

Republic of South Africa (RSA). (1995). *South African Qualifications Authority Act 58 of 1995.* Pretoria: Government Printer.

Walters, S. (2009): Editorial. *Learning @ work: perspectives on skills development in the workplace.* Pretoria: SAQA.

Young, M. (2001). Educational reform in South Africa. In A. Kraak, M. Young, (Eds.), *Education in retrospect: policy and implementation since 1990* (pp.17-40). Pretoria: HSRC. London: Institute of Education, University of London.