Outcomes-based qualification driven reform and equivalence in academic, vocational and occupational education

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Abstract: *The equivalence of academic, vocational, and occupationally specific education has dogged educationalists for decades, and the debate appears to be becoming increasingly prominent in the context of globalization. This paper reflects on the low status that vocational education has had, and a few of the ways that various countries have tried to deal with it. It examines the notion of the 'divide' between academic and vocational education, the contextual factors which affect how this 'divide' is manifested in different countries, and attempts to 'bridge the divide'. It then examines South Africa's National Qualifications Framework (NQF), which has parity as one of its explicit aims. The NQF aimed to provide overarching benchmarks in terms of standards and qualifications which are not derived from educational institutions; this was seen as a mechanism for creating a more equal education and training system in which different kinds of learning are seen as equivalent. One of the notions behind the NQF is that the same learning outcomes (skills, knowledge, attitudes, and values) can be learnt through different processes, and that different kinds of knowledge and learning are equivalent to each other. This paper examines some of the problems with this approach, and argues that in fact it might serve to reinforce the weakness of vocational programmes.*

Acknowledgements

This paper draws on research which I undertook with two colleagues at SAIDE for Umalusi into qualifications in the FET band, and in particular, the international survey conducted for that research, which attempted to gain some insight into the extent to which academic and vocational education are separated in senior secondary education systems. The full report is published as Umalusi (2003) *The Organization of Qualifications in the Further Education and Training Band: Current Thinking and Possibilities*. I have also drawn extensively on the work of Professor Michael Young of the Institute of Education, at the University of London, one of the leading scholars internationally in the area of vocational education and curriculum. I am extremely grateful to him for making some of his unpublished work available to me.

REFLECTING ON THE 'DIVIDE'

Issues of equivalence and parity of esteem between academic, vocational, and occupational education have been a concern since the beginning of mass education. According to Young *et al* (1997), the boundaries between academic and vocational education were formally institutionalized in the nineteenth century. Ever since, various analysts have questioned the nature and purpose of the historical divide between different kinds of education and training. To some the distinction stems from a division between mental and manual labour, and sustains inequality; to others it is flawed epistemologically or pedagogically. Flowing from these arguments, analysts have questioned whether it should be overcome, and if so, how (Watson 2001, Wolf 2002 and Stenström 1999). While for some the issue is about integrating vocational and academic education, for others it is about creating parity of esteem for necessarily different kinds of education programmes; for others again, the issue is about improving vocational programmes, and modernizing academic ones. The main reason for concern about the 'divide' is that vocational education has, almost everywhere, had lower status socially than academic education. There are, however, also longstanding concerns about the 'relevance' and 'usefulness' of the curriculum in academic schooling. This paper examines a few ways in which the 'divide' has been understood, as well as attempts to change it. It necessarily focuses mainly on secondary education, in South Africa called Further Education and Training (FET), as it is there that the issue is most pronounced internationally.

Social perception, and attempts to change it

To some, the division is about social perceptions. Watson (2001), for example, argues that the higher status of academic education originates more from the desire to reproduce social class through an educational hierarchy than from any concrete pedagogical principles. Vocational education has had particularly low status in some developing countries, especially former British colonies. Governments, however, have wanted people to go into vocational programmes to get 'useful' skills, which they have believed will decrease unemployment; consequently, they have hoped both that the lower status of vocational programmes is simply a matter of perception, and that perception is malleable. In many countries, however, the general populace has stubbornly opted for academic programmes, wherever it has had a choice (Umalusi 2003).

The case of Zimbabwe is a stark example (Umalusi 2003, Nherera 2000). The colonial government attempted to restrict the amount of education provided to the black population by missionaries. The feeling was that education for blacks should be practical in direction and limited in duration (the attitude best encapsulated by South African apartheid Prime Minister and architect of the hated Bantu education system, who notoriously stated that education for blacks must enable them to be 'hewers of wood and drawers of water'). Black Zimbabweans realized that the colonial government wanted to provide them with inferior education, whereas academic education was emphasized in schools for whites; academic and not vocational education thus came to be perceived as the means of social and economic advancement. Over the years, various reform attempts were introduced; these tried in different ways to entice black people into vocational schools. But vocational education continued to be viewed with contempt, and the value learners would attain in terms of career opportunities was seen as minimal.

Academic education continued to be offered in black schools; it was seen as 'vocational' in the sense that it provided better employment possibilities. After independence in 1980, the government attempted to expand educational provision dramatically, and enrolments in primary and secondary schools increased dramatically. Higher education was also expanded, including technical and vocational programmes through technical and vocational colleges and institutions. The new government also introduced a series of reforms attempting to improve the quality of vocational education, to encourage more people to take vocational programmes, and to increase the vocational content of academic programmes. Education with Production, for example, was introduced on the basis of what was seen as a Marxist concept of linking mental and manual work. The academic education of the colonial system was seen as having created unrealistic expectations, and having placed too much emphasis and value on paid employment and white-collar jobs, while failing to instill good work habits and ethics. This reform and others were not very successful, partly because perceptions among learners and parents were so strongly in favour of academic, and against vocational, education[1]; in addition, the state, as the largest employer, continued to employ people with an academic education.

General academic education has continued to be very highly valued and of a high standard, although Zimbabwe has been in an economic crisis for some time, and more recently in a political crisis, and there are very high numbers of unemployed graduates. People who continue their education post primary school generally choose to do so in general secondary schools. While this is a particularly stark example of resistance to vocational education, the trend is similar in many other countries, including South Africa, where the secondary school leaving certificate, the matric, is generally aspired to. It is interesting to juxtapose this experience with a country such as the Netherlands, where there is, relatively, less social inequality, and less difference in terms of prestige and status of different professions; although there are many divisions of institutions and qualifications, and although students obtain different qualifications, depending on which type of institution they attended, the social effects of these differences are not great (Umalusi 2003).

Some countries tried to do away with the lower status of vocational qualifications by decree, by issuing qualifications which are the same in name, regardless of whether or not they are provided in different institutions. In France, for example, the same qualification—the *baccalauréat*—has been awarded to young graduates from vocational as well as general and technological schools since 1995. All who have obtained a *baccalauréat* are entitled to call themselves *bacheliers* (bachelors), and are not required to state whether their qualification is vocational, technological, or general/academic. Possession of the *baccalauréat* is sufficient to gain admission to university; in fact it is seen as completion of the beginning of university study. However, the single name has not changed practices. Few of those in possession of the vocational *baccalauréat* do in fact go on to tertiary education, and fewer than 5% attend university; they would mainly need to complete additional courses because they would not have sufficient training in subjects deemed necessary to succeed in higher education. 68.7% of vocational bachelors do not study further, as opposed to the 90% of general and technological bachelors who do. Holders of general *baccalauréat*s tend to pursue long-term studies at university, while technological bachelors tend to study short programmes in the *Institutes Universitaires de Technologie* (Umalusi 2003). Since the introduction of the

Comment: I don't follow this: does it mean the first degree?

[1] In addition, evaluations showed that teachers did not really understand integration, and were ill-equipped for a transformative approach. Schools still followed Cambridge O-level exams, and the success of schools was judged on the basis of passes in these exams. See Nherera (2000) for a full discussion.

vocational *baccalauréat*, as a response to growing disenchantment with vocational programmes, a greater number of learners have obtained the *baccalauréat*. However, this has been criticized, because now a higher qualification is necessary to obtain the same level in the workforce for which a lower qualification used to suffice; in other words, in terms of the position that an individual can obtain in the workplace, the additional two years of study have not helped[2] (Cam 2001).

A variant on this is the Italian reform whereby qualifications obtained through vocational schools (*Istituti profesionali*), although different to those obtained through academic or technical schools, (*Licei* or *Istituti tecnici* respectively) were deemed to offer access to higher education, and thus, formally equivalent. Again, in practice, it is usually difficult for learners with vocational or technical qualifications to gain access to academic higher education institutions. While formally all upper secondary schools have the same status, there is an informal hierarchy, according to which the *Liceo* is the most important, the *Istituo technico* the next, and *Istituto profesionale* the least important. About 36% of the school population is enrolled in *Licei*, 24% in *Istituti profesionali*, and 40% in *Istituti tecnici*; students at *Licei*, are generally from wealthy families, while those from poorer homes attend the technical and vocational schools. Predictably, success in university is highest amongst students who come from *Licei* (Umalusi 2003).

But does the term 'divide' refer to a fixed phenomenon?

While there are probably differences between academic and vocational education in all countries, it appears as if there is no such thing as a 'divide' as a single, homogenous phenomenon; the organization of academic and vocational provision happens in very different ways in different countries, and differences between the two have therefore manifested themselves in very different ways. Provision of education and training, particularly vocational education and training, relates to the division of labour and the occupational structure in any given country. The nature and organization of vocational education is an important component of the problem of lack of parity of esteem; vocational education in different countries is located in different institutional contexts and in different histories, and involves different roles and assumptions for the state, for educational institutions, for employers, and for other social partners (Young 2003c). For example, in some countries, such as various South East Asian and continental European countries, the state has played a key role in vocational education; in others, such as the UK and USA, it has played a minimal one.

The division between academic and vocational education is operationalized in many countries through the provision of separate academic and vocational streams in post-compulsory or senior-secondary education. In some countries the divide is located in different curricula within academic and vocational programmes. In others, learners obtain different qualifications, according to whether they follow an academic or a vocational pathway. In some countries there vast differences between the kinds of institutions vocational and academic programmes are located in (Umalusi 2003). There are also sometimes different approaches to learning; according to Young et al (1997), the academic and vocational divide is characterized by the separation of groups of learners according to whether they are seen as capable of theoretical or practical learning, and distinguishes types of qualifications which stress either theoretical or practical learning. Although in nearly all countries there are

[2] See Dore 1976, *The Diploma Disease*, one of the seminal texts on 'qualification inflation', for an analysis of how increasing levels of educational attainment lower the relative value of education.

differences of prestige attached different tracks, which are partly related to (and reinforced by) the type of students they attract and the life chances they offer, the differences in the extent to which this exists are considerable. Most countries have some form of the academic/vocational divide, and the frequent corollary of vocational qualifications having low status; however, there are large differences in the way this operate in different countries, as well as differences in the extent of the disparity in esteem (Young 2003c).

For example, the English (including Wales and Northern Island) system, which has influenced many Anglophone African countries, is an example of a differentiated system in which vocational education has had low status; it is debatable the extent to which this is simply due to public perception and the extent to which vocational programmes have been of a low quality. Some ascribe the problem to government neglect and a history of voluntarism, based on a belief that the 'market' will influence rational choices, aggravated by a historical lack of interest and involvement by employers (Young 2003c). A series of changes and reforms has not really changed the attitude of the general public, which increasingly chooses general academic programmes when it has a choice (Wolf 2002). Of particular interest to this paper are recent reforms, which have been strongly outcomes-based and qualifications-driven[3]; I discuss this approach to reform later.

On the other hand, there are a range of European countries with a history of successful vocational education based on differentiated systems, in which learners follow different types of learning programmes from fairly early on in their educational careers. Many of these programmes, however, include at least 10 years of general education, and often a considerable amount of what would be considered general education in other countries. Most well known is the German 'duel system', of which one of the unique features is the high status of the work-based route, taken by between 50 to 60% of 16-year-olds, and spreading across every conceivable occupation—service and clerical, as well as industrial (Umalusi 2003). Having a 'license to practice' as a requirement across a large proportion of occupations in continental Europe probably raises the status of vocational education among employers and learners, as well as society generally (Young 2003c).

The 'divide' between academic and vocational education in the English system is clearly different to what it is in Germany. In the Anglophone tradition vocational education has been seen as practical training offered to an individual with the express purpose of equipping that individual with skills to be immediately applied in a job. A broader approach to vocational education, such as that found in Germany, sees it as that which prepares learners generally for the workplace, within a broadly delineated area of the economy (ibid).

Another factor which differs widely from country to country is the extent to which there are higher education pathways in vocational education, as well as the relationship between professional and vocational education. For example, in Nigeria, learners in vocational colleges or schools tend to proceed to polytechnics, whereas learners in general senior secondary schools tend to go to universities (Umalusi 2003); in South Africa, on the other hand, learners in technical colleges very seldom have been able to continue at universities or technikons. This is aspect is important, because access to higher education appears to be a significant factor in the extent to which vocational education is valued. Generally, the

[3] Outcomes-based education can be understood in various ways, including, for example, classroom-level teaching strategies which focus on learners and learning. In this paper I use the term 'outcomes-based qualifications-driven' reform, to designate a specific approach which attempts to drive the reform of education and training through standards-based qualifications.

availability of quality higher technical and vocational education programmes contributes to generally better perceptions of technical and vocational education at further education level. In Finland, for example, about 35% of the age cohort from 16 to 18 years of age are in vocational programmes. About 28% of learners from secondary education (general and vocational) go on to universities (this number includes learners in professional programmes); of these, a very high proportion—about 60%—go to vocational tertiary institutions, such as polytechnics, which have, until recently, only been allowed to offer undergraduate qualifications (although this is changing). There are still differences—graduates from universities tend to become planners and researchers, whereas those from polytechnics tend to become mid-level managers; however, it is clear that vocational programmes are considered a viable option by a relatively large percentage of the population (Umalusi 2003).

The conditions for success in vocational education and training are not easily isolated, and it also very difficult to draw clear causal relationships between education and other aspects of a country and its economy. Mauritius, for example, is a 'developing' country with an effective vocational education system. While the vocational system partly targets less able students who are unable to continue in general education, it is generally regarded as being of a high quality, with good facilities. However, it is difficult to draw causal relationships; high employment rates in Mauritius could be a contributing factor, as could be the fact that vocational training generally takes place post-secondary schooling, and is of a high quality (Umalusi 2003). This leads me to my next point: the general component of vocational programmes.

The general component of vocational programmes

Two rather different approaches to the organization of education and training in South East Asia have both been seen as successful, partly, perhaps, because they include a large component of general academic training in or before vocational programmes. In Japan a very high proportion of learners (possibly 90%) stay on full time in general, post-compulsory education, with high numbers succeeding in mathematics. On-the-job vocational education is then undertaken by employers (Umalusi 2003). In Singapore the education system is geared towards providing at least ten years of general education for every child. This comprises six years of primary education and four years of secondary education. In addition to the ten years of general education, students can opt to attend technical-vocational, junior college, and polytechnic courses after secondary school. While vocational education and training is first introduced to students at the secondary level, the vocational education and training system really takes effect only at post-secondary school levels. The well-funded and highly centralized provision of technical education in Singapore is effective—it is well subscribed to, has high levels of achievement, and has been seen as a contributor to economic success (ibid); South East Asia has generally been recognized as an area where education and training has had a significant impact on economic success (see for example Green 1999 and Gopinathan 1999)[4].

The amount of general education in vocational programmes is a major issue of concern. Academic education has been associated with personal development and 'education for its own sake'; but it has also been associated with an emphasis on abstract theory and general analytic skills (Umalusi 2003). Some have argued that many vocational programmes don't give learners analytical skills and what are sometimes called 'generic skills', such as good

[4] Of course this is to some extent contentious. See Bello 2000; Harvey 2000; Shutt 1998; or Burkett and Hart-Landsberg 2000; for alternative explanations of economic success in East Asia.

language ability. While across countries vocational education is seen as playing a role in preparation and selection for work, the general analytical training of broad academic training also prepares learners for the world of work, usually at higher levels of workplace hierarchies; it is not just about further study (Wolf 2002); in addition, these skills are increasingly seen as important in the context of globalization. Thus, while, as discussed above, some see the 'divide' as purely based on social perception, others argue that vocational programmes in many countries deny learners access to meaningful knowledge and skills. There are two variants of this argument. One is that many vocational programmes don't include enough general components; subjects like languages, which enable learners to read and write complex prose, and mathematics, which train the ability to think abstractly, understand causal relationships, solve problems, et cetera. Another approach is that the way in which knowledge is conceived of in many vocational programmes is limited. This point is discussed in depth by Michael Young in a paper titled *Conceptualising vocational knowledge; some theoretical considerations*, some of the arguments of which I will return to later.

Although 'the divide' is not a fixed thing, there is an increasing rhetorical convergence internationally on bridging it

What clearly emerged in our research for Umalusi, from which I have drawn some anecdotes above, is that the degree of integration between vocational and academic programmes does not appear to be the main success or failure factor internationally; neither does it appear to be the organization of education and training *per se* or the organization of qualifications. What is also clear is that education and training, both vocational and academic, is profoundly related to the state and the economy, in a range of different ways, and that the kinds of changes that countries are involved in is obviously affected by the systems already in place.

However, despite the vast differences in practice, what is common is that most countries have felt pressure to reform their post-secondary systems in various ways, and commonly, there has been a desire to 'bridge the gap' between general and vocational programmes, by increasing the common components of the different programmes, by attempting to raise the status of vocational qualifications, or by trying to change social perceptions, as discussed above. Increasingly, the context of globalization and the changing nature of work are perceived to be creating additional pressure to change on the traditional academic and vocational tracks. What becomes apparent when looking into different countries is the large number of different processes and reforms that have increasingly become prominent (Umalusi 2003). Recently, the rhetoric in many countries has been about training people to have flexible skills, the ability to relearn, et cetera; of course finding the best way to do this has been highly disputed. There is a general belief that work is increasingly not based on a division between mental and manual labour, and therefore the divide between academic and vocational education is increasingly less relevant. Thus, internationally in further education and training or senior secondary education[5], equivalence is an increasing preoccupation of policy formulators and governments.

During the late 1990s, in many countries around the world, reforms were introduced in attempts to redefine and reorganize secondary education and training. Reasons for such reforms range from the desire to increase the retention rates in secondary schooling, to changing social and economic conditions (ibid). Reforming education and training systems is,

[5] In some countries further education and training coincides with senior secondary education, and in some places takes place after it.

of course, easier than engaging in economic structural change; various analysts have argued that emphasis on education and training is often part of a neo-liberal approach that reduces welfare. Ostentatious education reforms create the perception of a caring government, and failure can be more easily blamed on individuals, who have not got the right skills, and therefore don't have jobs (see, for example, Foley 1994). In addition, a focus on education and training reform does not question whether or not competitiveness is, in fact, the way to success. While it is not possible to explore these issues further in this paper, it is worth highlighting here that the causal relationships are not always clear—whether, for example, education leads to economic growth or economic growth leads to education—but it is dangerous to see education and training as the major causal factor which can solve social and economic problems.

One of the approaches which has been prominent in the reform of vocational education in various countries, but notably the UK and Australia, is the outcomes-based, qualification-driven movement (Spreen 2001); this approach is often also called a standards-based approach, and although there are differences between these two terms, I will use them interchangeably in this paper. One of the clear links between the outcomes-based qualifications-driven approach and vocational education reform is the increasing concern that a vocational qualification should be an expression of what someone can do; how or where they have acquired the skill is irrelevant. As Young (2003c) argues, attempting to use qualifications as leverage for control over the vocational education system has proved to be problematic; it ignores the extent to which the 'where and how' of skills and knowledge acquisition are an important factor in determining the status and recognition of a qualification.

It is not clear to what extent this movement has been explicitly linked with the international concern for parity; perhaps it was so largely to the extent that it was an attempt to improve the quality and relevance of vocational programmes. To the extent that it has been linked to qualifications frameworks, it certainly has been linked to desires to create more formal equivalence, as well as more accountable qualifications systems (see the forthcoming special edition of the *Journal of Education and Work*, 16(3), which focuses on qualifications frameworks internationally). However, in South Africa, this approach has been applied to the entire education and training system. The South African National Qualifications Framework (NQF) is an explicit attempt to create parity by reforming the entire education and training system through this kind of outcomes-based, qualifications-driven approach, and as is a useful reform to investigate in relation to the 'divide', as well general issues about using qualifications to drive the reform of education and training. I will now, therefore, examine some of the particular motives behind South Africa's approach to creating parity, and what some of the problems with these approaches are.

THE SOUTH AFRICAN NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK

The South African experience embodies a trend which appears to be gaining momentum in various parts of the world. In 1995, South Africa introduced a National Qualifications Framework (NQF)[6], which was conceived as providing overarching benchmarks in terms of

[6] After some difficulties with implementing the NQF, a Study Group was commissioned in 2001 to review obstacles to implementation. This group reported in May 2002 (Departments of Education and Labour 2002). Recommendations from the Departments of Education and Labour were, at the time of writing this paper, expected soon. As such, the NQF might be substantially changed. This document only explores the NQF as it has been developed until June 2003.

standards and qualifications which are not derived from educational institutions; this was seen as mechanism for creating a more equal education and training system in which different kinds of learning are seen as equivalent.

One of the goals of the NQF was to create integration (and/or parity) between different kinds of learning. The notion of integration operated at different levels, and included different kinds of things. For example, the fragmentation of the education and training system along racial and ethnic lines needed to be overcome. In relation to this, the goal of integration was primarily social. However, divisions between the natural and social sciences in the curriculum were also challenged; as was the way in which pure and applied research was separated in research institutions[7]; the dichotomy between academic and everyday knowledge; the divide between general academic and vocational education; the distinction between mental and manual training; and that between theory and practice, were all seen as divisions to be overcome.

Perhaps the strong—and unquestionable—social desire for integration was the overriding desire here, and discursively created a perception or assumption that all other kinds of integration were necessarily possible and desirable, and that the different kinds of integration were necessarily related to each other. These different divisions were linked, in much of policy documentation, to social divisions, particularly of race and class; overcoming them would create social integration and mobility. South African policies, captured particularly in the idea of an NQF, and the accompanying legislations and regulations, are based on an attempt to create a more equal education and training system, in which different kinds of learning are seen as equivalent. To some, the notion of creating parity was paramount, while integration was more important to others. However, the general assumption was that an outcomes-based qualifications-driven approach, encapsulated in the NQF, would achieve these goals.

The separation between academic and vocational education within the formal system is different conceptually to the separation between non-formal and informal on the one hand, and formal on the other. The one separation, discussed at length above, is based on different kinds of education programmes within formal education institutions and systems. As I have also discussed above, both the notion of the separation, and various other aspects of vocational and academic programmes, have been subjected to much scrutiny. But education policy formulators in South Africa were also concerned about creating equivalence between the knowledge learnt on-the-job, or in life, and the knowledge learnt through a formal education institution. This was partly based on the experience of many people in South Africa who had been denied access to formal education, yet still had learnt much that was valuable. Activists, for example, who often did not have much formal education training, had been often engaged in high levels of strategic planning, analysis and organizing in the struggle against apartheid. The idea that formal and informal learning should be seen as equivalent was also used to counter the argument that black workers' lack of formal qualifications justified the lower pay that they were given in many workplaces, even when they had the equivalent skills. It was believed that such skills and knowledge learnt through non-formal programmes and informal processes[8] should be certified, and that this certification would provide redress and facilitate a process towards employment equity.

[7] The ways in which pure and applied research should be separate and the extent to which they are perceived to be increasingly integrated has been debated extensively; see, for example, Muller 2000.

[8] Here I am distinguishing between non-formal education as meaning non-certified education, but organized with some degree of institutionalization; and informal education referring to what an individual learns in life,

These two ways of separating how people acquire knowledge and skills (between vocational and academic programmes on the one hand, and between formal and informal learning on the other) were very linked in South African debates. This is probably because of the widely held belief that workers' on-the-job training was the same as what they could have learnt in a formal education programme. The NQF aimed to overcome divides, and create parity between all forms of learning; it was explicitly an attempt to create a more equal education and training system, in which different kinds of learning would be seen as equivalent.

Driving reform through 'standards'

One of the key ways in which this was to be done was through standards and qualifications which were not institutionally developed or located, which would be the benchmarks against which all learning would be measured[9]. In an attempt to achieve parity, the NQF was conceptualized to wrest away from formal institutions the power of defining knowledge and skills; to do away with educational institutions as the source of authority on qualifications. This would enable industry, for example, to play a much larger role in defining standards for vocational courses. At the same time, it would ensure that formal educational institutions would not control the benchmarks of what was worth knowing, nor be the only arbiters of what learners have achieved. This is partly related to the fact that many formal educational institutions were regarded with suspicion. They had acquiesced, to varying degrees, with the apartheid system, and the fear was that if they judged people against their own programmes, they would discriminate in an elitist (and possibly racist) manner.

The idea was to find a way of defining levels of knowledge and skills outside of the formal education system. These agreed definitions of knowledge and skills would then be the benchmarks against which all learning would be measured, whether it took place in formal institutions, through non-formal learning programmes, or informally on the job or through the course of life.

In other words, South Africa attempted to reform its entire education and training system through an approach which views qualifications as independent instruments of reform defined in terms of common outcomes and levels, and separate from specific inputs, programmes, and institutions (Young 2003c). While existing qualifications were accepted in the 'interim', for the sake of practicality, the conceptual underpinning of the NQF was that ultimately institutions would not define qualifications, but would rather teach and assess against qualifications defined by stakeholder-driven structures. A quality assurance process would ensure that the learning that happened did indeed meet the requirements of the qualifications, while recognition of prior learning processes, similarly quality assured, would ensure that other learning could be measured against the very same qualifications.

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outside of all organized educational experiences. One way of looking at this distinction is in intention; informal learning is usually a by-product of other experiences, while non-formal learning implies a degree of intention to learn. South African education policy aims to find a way of valuing both of these, and achieving parity for them with formal education.

[9] As Michael Young (2003c) shows, this notion is inherent to qualifications-driven reform processes in other Anglophone countries, particularly the UK itself. He juxtaposes this approach to the reform of vocational education with an institutional approach, in which qualifications are seen as embedded features of education and training, and are part of a system that includes institutional links, syllabuses, assessment methods, learning programmes, et cetera.

The NQF would be composed of standards and qualifications developed by stakeholders away from formal institutions and not linked to specific programmes. Freestanding qualifications and unit standards would be developed by democratic structures, and all learning could be measured in relation to them. The certification of non-formal learning programmes, as well as the recognition of prior learning (which is basically what certification of informal learning would entail) would necessarily entail a break between the site of programme design, learning and assessment, on the one hand, and of qualifications design on the other. The NQF, composed of the standards and qualifications against which all education and training could be measured, would over-arch all education and training separately from institutions. Locating the design of qualifications and standards in a separate framework was planned to be the mechanism for creating integration in the different ways discussed above, and hence creating social integration.

Part of the seductiveness of this idea was a discursive appeal to integration and equality. Social integration, and the creation of single systems where there had been racial and ethnic divisions, was of overriding concern to many South Africans. Similarly, equality for all was the project of the new democratic state. However, it is arguable whether in fact 'integration' of different types of education necessarily leads to social integration; creating parity between education and training programmes does not necessarily lead to social parity.

The NQF was viewed as a sensible solution with a high degree of internal coherence, and seemed to many a flawless model of how education and training could and should be organized in society. The strong association of the NQF with the broader liberation project, including the goals of social integration and redress, has resulted in many assuming that the theoretical position it assumes is sound; in other words, its moral purpose is confused with its mechanisms. As I argue in a forthcoming paper (Allais 2003:319), 'not only do the policies create an assumption that mechanisms have been put in place to achieve the stated objectives, but the systems have developed in such a way that they are, to many, the only conceivable way of achieving the objectives'. Criticisms have therefore tended to focus on implementation problems, and the energy of many South African educationalists has been directed at polishing various corners of this conceptual artifice, and developing more and more complicated policies, rules, and regulations, which, it is hoped, will enable implementation 'as it is supposed to be done'. I argue that while the ideas behind the policies have been noble, the mechanisms which have been implemented are unlikely to achieve the goal of integration, and are in fact directing energy and resources away from more important ways in which the education and training system could be improved. As Young (2003c) points out, there is little evidence that the qualifications-driven approach is a meaningful basis for enhancing quality and quantity of learning.

Problems with outcomes-based qualification-driven reform

The conception and role of knowledge in the curriculum

One of the problems with the outcomes-based qualifications-driven approach encapsulated in the South African NQF is the extent to which it undermines knowledge, and particularly, the differences between everyday knowledge and 'school' or 'curriculum' knowledge. To understand how this operates, it is necessary to briefly reflect on the notion of standards, and in particular, how they have been conceptualized in South Africa.

The specific term adopted in South African policy is the 'unit standard', which is defined as 'specific descriptions of learning achievements agreed on by all major stakeholders in the

particular area of learning' (Departments of Education and Labour 2002:77). These standards or learning outcomes could be specified in advance, and people could then be assessed against them; this would be the case for people who had learnt through different programmes in different institutions, as well as people who had learnt informally. This is captured in the report of a study group who were appointed to review the NQF, who stated that the same outcomes can be achieved 'through learning programmes that vary to some extent in content and to a large extent in pedagogy' (Departments of Education and Labour 2002:78).

This 'common sense' approach is not compatible with how education actually works. As Young (2003a) argues, drawing on the work of Bernstein, curriculum knowledge is not the same as everyday knowledge. This is not because of elites that want to maintain their status by controlling the curriculum (although the curriculum can and has been used by elites in this manner). In fact, curriculum knowledge *must be discontinuous*, not continuous with everyday experience; the goal of the curriculum is to take people beyond the knowledge available to them through their everyday life. The knowledge acquired through the curriculum is cognitively superior to everyday knowledge because it is comprised of codes and practices, embodied in collective understandings, which have explanatory power and capacity for generalization (this does not mean that it is superior practically; everyday knowledge is needed for everyday life, where curriculum knowledge would often be useless). As (2003a) Williamson, quoted in Young (2003a) says:

> Whether in astrophysics or literature, there is a body of knowledge to be learned and renewed. Most would like (it) to be useful and many would like it to be easy. However it is not often the former and rarely the latter. What really matters about knowledge is that it is true or rather that we can learn or find the truth or truths as best we can, in any field. This is what education and more specifically, universities are for.

Everyday knowledge, on the other hand, is contextually bound, tied to practical concerns, and as such does not enable generalization and explanation in the same way. This differentiation is fundamental to what is distinctive about education; a curriculum based on everyday experience would not enable learners to move beyond that experience, or to understand it in a broader perspective (Young 2003a). While various critiques of knowledge might have been useful and necessary to some extent (and this is particularly clear in South Africa where much of the educational establishment taught highly ideologically driven programmes in defense of the apartheid system), they have resulted in an unintentional collusion with the market-led forms of instrumentalism that now drive educational policy and which are, Young argues, in a deep sense anti-educational.

This analysis of knowledge clearly is in tension with one of the assumptions of the NQF—that knowledge acquired through formal and informal processes is the same. As Young (ibid) shows, while it is theoretically possible for someone to assimilate curriculum knowledge (or, to use Bernstein's terminology, 'vertical discourses') through informal processes, it is extremely unlikely that this will happen in the course of everyday life. The knowledge that is acquired in everyday life, nuanced, subtle, useful, and extensive as it might be, is not the same as the knowledge obtained through the curriculum. The assumption that stated learning outcomes more important than the knowledge bases which have comprised formal education, does not so much create a basis for parity as fudge really important differences, because it assumes that the same learning outcomes can somehow capture different knowledge bases which are learnt in through different processes. The standards-driven approaches to education reform is a problem as a mechanism to create parity, as it in fact draws attention and energy away from curriculum issues, and blurs where the real problems with programmes lie.

There are at least two important respects in which this is a problem for the issue at hand. The first is that, as already stated, the mechanism which aims to create parity actually blurs important distinctions. In addition, this approach is likely to reinforce, instead of counteract, some of the reasons for the low status of vocational programmes in the first place. Young (2003a, 2003b) shows how the problem with many vocational programmes is linked to an undermining of knowledge. Drawing on the work of Durkheim and Bernstein, he shows that one of problems with many vocational programmes is their knowledge base, which does not, in many instances, include knowledge areas which enable learners to generalize, predict, or abstract. He also shows how the standards-based attempt at vocational reform further marginalizes debates about knowledge from the vocational curriculum; the immediate practical concerns of employers are not able to provide a curriculum which functions in the same way as one based on specialist pedagogic communities.

Young's (ibid) analysis is useful in understanding why, in many instances, vocational programmes have *not* been equivalent to academic programmes, not just in terms of social perceptions, but also in terms of the way vocational programmes have denied learners access to knowledge and principles of knowledge that can enable analysis and further learning. Secondly, it is a useful analysis of the problems of a standards-based reform of vocational education, which not only does not improve on this identified problem, but in fact, can worsen it.

Another problem with a standards-based approach is a tendency to atomize the curriculum into discreet bits. In South Africa the unit standard is supposed to be the smallest unit of educational achievement that can be credited for certification, and the component unit of qualifications. This is based on the assumption that knowledge can be broken up into separate elements and put together by learners or teachers in any number of different combinations. There is particularly a tendency to assume that vocational knowledge can and should function in this way; an individual can learn separately how to perform a series of discreet tasks in the workplace. As Gamble (2002) clearly shows, even an apprenticeship, the form of education most rooted in a workplace, is ultimately a sustained process of teaching learners to visualize and internalize part-whole relationships. In other words, knowledge, even manual knowledge, such as furniture manufacture, forms a coherent whole, in which elements can be systematically related. Learning programmes are about scaffolding learners' knowledge so that they are able to build a picture of the whole, and see how the parts relate to the whole. Educators may not always be able to articulate this explicitly (which is, of course, another problem for standards, which assumes that everything to be learnt and assessed can be stated upfront), but this is what they are helping learners to do, when they engage in teaching a learning programme.

The South African NQF tried to create equivalence between academic and vocational programmes through a standards-based approach which assumed that there is no difference between everyday and specialist knowledge, and that standards and qualifications stating learning outcomes can be separate from learning programmes. This move instead is likely to increase the poor quality of vocational knowledge: it undermines the role of knowledge and skill bases which enable generalization and abstraction or the visualization of part-whole relationships, and it de-emphasizes the scaffolding of knowledge and skills in vocational curricula.

The belief that the standard is enough to ensure that learning which happens through informal processes can be the same as learning which happens through formal education also results conceptually in the de-institutionalization of education. Academic education, which has a stronger institutional base and history, is likely to be more insulated from the worst effects of this kind of process. I now, therefore, turn to a discussion of the role of institutions and education.

Education and institutions

Defining what should be measured, and measuring the extent to which it has been learnt, are essentially problematic. Not all learning can be stated explicitly, particularly upfront, and what is easiest to measure is recall of a number of memorizable facts, as well as performance of observable skills. Many educationalists would agree that these skills, although useful, are not the most valuable aspects of education and training. The notions of validity, reliability, and fairness in assessment are also complex and problematic. As much research has shown, assessment in education is always based on the assessor's value judgments of contextually bound performances by learners, even when explicit criteria are stated upfront (for example, Wolf 1993).

In non-formal education, external or formal assessment does not need to take place. Learners decide whether learning has fitted their needs, and learners and educators can jointly adjust learning programmes. Because it is non-certificated, the learning that happens is valued in itself, to the extent that it assists the learners in the purpose that they were learning for. Part of the reason that non-formal education is able to meet the needs of learners with some degree of immediacy is precisely because it does not have to be formally measured, and can therefore be shaped by an interaction between learner and teacher.

But qualifications are, arguably, a necessary part of large-scale formal educational provision; as societies move away from non-formal education, qualifications and certification become more important. It is probable that any kind of society which depends on large scale provision of education and training needs some kind of proxy or short hand as proof of what people have learnt over a long period, through which other people can have some degree of reasonable expectation of what a person knows and can do.

Much of what is learnt cannot be formally assessed. Implicitly, formal education is taken to be more than simply the results of formal assessments. Learning works in formal education systems by providing sustained initiation into different areas of thought and knowledge (as discussed above). Learners are socialized into a discipline, a field, a content area, or a way of operating. In this process, much is learnt which is not formally assessed, and which cannot be easily assessed. While, as stated above, assessment is a complex, problematic, and subjective exercise, because learning through the sustained process of a formal programme is implicitly taken to be more than the sum total of assessment results. The assessment of evidence produced, such as exams and pieces of writing, practical demonstrations, or presentations of research or investigation findings, measures only a few aspects of what is learnt, and not always the most important ones. A range of things which cannot be easily articulated or assessed is learnt, and assessment is understood as measuring a sample of what learners have learnt. This is understood in conjunction with the knowledge that learners have passed through a process in which society has (or might have) a degree of trust.

It may be the case that many institutions are not conscious of this; it is not always explicit. (See for example, Broekman and Pendelbury (2002), who draw on the work of Searle to

explain how academic practice is about a host of activities which cannot be articulated explicitly or assessed explicitly, but which learners are immersed in). The notion of socialization into a discipline applies to both academic and vocational learning—in both there are various aspects of a systematic and lengthy learning process which cannot be easily put into words, but in which skilled professionals in the appropriate area can make informed judgments about.

Thus, the problems with the standards-driven approach are the assumptions that everything that needs to be learnt and assessed can be clearly stated upfront; once standards have been created, that it is unproblematic both to teach and assess against them; and that the institutional context in which this learning takes place is irrelevant. Qualifications and standards are not things which can exist on their own, separate from learning programmes, as a meaningful basis for improving an education system. In other words, a focus on institutional reform, improving the curricula, learning resources, and skills of educators, would probably do far more to improve the quality, and therefore raise the status of vocational programmes.

Although qualifications play an important role in the education system, they cannot capture everything that the learner must learn or has learnt. Society trusts institutions to put learners through a learning process, and to assess them, and the combination of these two things are understood when someone has a qualification. A formal education system is based on the judgment of the professionals, who do their job based on years of accumulated wisdom and tradition[10]; educational institutions build up a reservoir of resources over time, both material and intellectual. This does not, of course, mean that professionals and institutions cannot abuse society's trust in them, or use their position to perpetuate particular knowledge systems which give them power in society; all South Africans who were taught that South African history began when Jan Van Riebeck arrived at the Cape are aware of this. The real task, however, is to challenge this knowledge within the institution; to challenge the curriculum, and to make the case for other knowledge, rather than pretending that it is not knowledge, but learning outcomes, which are important. I am not arguing, therefore, that institutions should are above criticism or should remain unchanged. I am arguing that institutions are necessary for formal education, and for the kinds of knowledge systems that it is based on. The standards-based system in fact is a very weak challenge to narrowly ideological agendas in education systems.

Thus, as Young (2003c) argues, one of the greatest weaknesses of the standards-based approach is that it fails to take into account the extent to which the workplace or college in which skills and knowledge are acquired is an important factor in determining the status and recognition of a qualification. Governmental decrees, telling us that certificates from different institutions are equal, will not stop society from seeing them as different; changes in perceptions can only happen over time, and through real changes in the institutions themselves.

I have described two problems with outcomes-based, qualifications-driven approaches to educational reform—the undermining of the distinction between 'curriculum' or 'school' knowledge and everyday knowledge, and the marginalization of institutions from how the system is conceptualized. While there are other problems with the system, these two are

[10] There is a debate here about the extent to which accumulated knowledge resides in the individual or in the community of practice.

particularly problems in terms of equivalence between vocational and academic programmes. I have shown how they blur important differences and divert energy away from real problems. The stronger institutional history of academic education means that even while it might formally adopt a standards based approach, it is likely to be insulated from the problems described above; the unit standards approach has only really been embraced in vocational and occupational programmes at an FET level in South Africa, and has not penetrated far into the schooling or tertiary sector. This is likely to result in a widening of the differences, as well as a further weakening of the quality of vocational programmes.

Finally, I want to consider the problems that an outcomes-based qualifications driven approach entails for assessment and quality assurance, again through a focus on current debates and systems in South Africa.

Overloading of assessment and quality assurance

Quality assurance is an important part of the conceptualization of the NQF; various aspects of the system were designed with a view to creating quality education and training. A conceptually and logistically complicated system has been set up, through which education and training providers have to obtain accreditation, assessment has to be moderated, and learners are able to obtain certificates. In this section, I will briefly examine some of the problems with this system. Although this system has been designed to encompass the entire education and training system, it is really taking effect within the realm of vocational education, and, to some extent, in private education.

In higher education in South Africa, qualifications have in the past derived their value from the institution issuing them. Institutions design learning programmes, design assessment tasks, and evaluate students' performance; an external peer review—the evaluation of students' performance as well as of the assessment tasks—by a colleague at another higher education institution, functions as a check on the system. The existence of the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) will mean that there is an attempt to articulate the standards to which institutions should be performing, and there will be more processes in place to monitor whether institutions are performing adequately. However, certificates will still be issued by institutions. The source of the value of the qualification lies in the institution, and degrees from different institutions are valued differently by society.

In public schooling and public secondary level vocational education, an arm of the state (previously Safcert, now Umalusi), under the Minister of Education but separate from the Department of Education (as the provider), issued certificates[11]. This also applied to vocational qualifications in public institutions. Individual institutions did not have much autonomy over what is taught and learnt, but did conduct some components of the summative assessment internally. Workplace learning on-the-job has either been non-certified, or, through the apprenticeship system, certified on the basis of 'doing your time'; one of the problems with it was that individuals obtained certificates which were not recognized in other workplaces or by institutions of learning. Private providers in vocational education have

[11] There is also a private examining body, the Independent Examinations Board, through which learners from a range of different kinds of private schools also get the same certificate. (There are currently other small examining bodies; see the 2002 Ministerial Investigation into a Single Examination for details in this regard.) Matric certificates are currently awarded by Umalusi, and have been awarded by Safcert in the recent past; prior to that they were awarded by the Joint Matriculation Board. But in a sense, the system is the same; the state (Department of Education) determines the syllabus, and the state (Safcert/Umalusi) awards the certificate.

issued their own qualifications, sometimes in conjunction with or under the auspices of Industry Training Boards. The NQF was supposed to bring these different approaches into alignment, both through the outcomes-based approach which I have already discussed, and also through the quality assurance system.

Before discussing the new quality assurance in more depth, it should be noted that Safcert's (Umalusi's) traditional role in issuing certificates has been based on nationally and provincially set exams (and also, in the past, exams set by ethnic departments) which were monitored and moderated at a range of levels (question papers were moderated, as well as exam writing processes and marking, and there was statistical moderation of the final results). In addition, the examinations took place against an institutional context; the assessment and certification were seen in conjunction with an entire system of provision. Although the system was loaded on the final exams (something which has been much criticized), and although the exams themselves have been subject to much (probably valid) criticism, the certification was in some senses linked to institutional provision. Of course, the system of provision was also highly flawed in various ways. But Safcert issued certificates against national exams and in conjunction with the Department of education as the provider and examiner.

In the new system, the idea is for qualifications to be issued by Education and Training Quality Assurance bodies (ETQAs). Umalusi and the HEQC are two such bodies, and there are about 25 sectoral ETQAs set up under the Sectoral Education and Training Authorities (SETAs). ETQAs are supposed to issue certificates for any assessment conducted by a registered assessor in an accredited provider against registered standards. The assumption of the NQF and its accompanying policies and procedures is that national examinations and assessment should play a minor role, and should increasingly be replaced by internal assessment, conducted at a provider/site level and moderated by quality assurance bodies; the quality assurance bodies will then issue certificates. The assumption is that as long as a qualification is registered, accredited providers, who have registered assessors, can conduct their own assessment. In order for this to function, however, the accreditation process of providers, the registration process for assessors, and the moderation of the assessment, all have to be extremely extensive (and therefore costly).

In order to allow institutions to conduct their own assessment entirely, against programmes which have been designed internally, and which have only the unit standards as a common element with equivalent programmes in other institutions, and then expect a national statutory body to issue certificates to their learners, it is likely that accreditation requirements will become increasingly controlling and authoritarian. A cursory glance at some of the accreditation requirement lists that have been developed by the various quality assurance structures of the SETAs reveals a highly prescriptive and often intensely managerialist approach to how an education and training organization should be run. Besides the ideological problems, and the fact that we have returned to authoritarianism with this system, it is incredibly cumbersome, both for organizations to comply with (and fill in the forms), and for quality assurance bodies to measure. Finally, it is entirely possible for an organization to comply with all the detailed requirements of the quality assurance bodies, and still produce very poor education. Likewise, it is possible that an organisation that does not comply with requirements is producing very good education.

There are also various problems with the notion of 'registered assessors'. Currently the requirements for being a registered assessor are that an individual has been trained (or

awarded the standard through recognition of prior learning) against the assessment unit standard, and he or she has produced a portfolio of assessment tasks in the subject area. They are then registered by the SETA, because assessors are supposed only to be registered in specific subject areas (in South African jargon, as 'constituent assessors'); this is despite the fact that the assessment standards are designed generically, and the training is conducted generically. The providers (mainly entrepreneurial private providers) that are offering assessment courses are inevitably of varying degrees of quality. But what is clear (even to the proponents of this system) is that this process is insufficient; a 'registered assessor' will not necessarily be able to design appropriate assessment tasks; it is also not necessarily the case that all assessments that they conduct will be equivalent to those conducted by other 'registered assessors'.

Partly, the proponents would argue, this is because the assessment unit standard is in fact about conducting assessment, and not designing assessment tasks. Various SETAs are now, therefore, considering setting assessment tasks, or collecting assessment 'tools', that assessors can draw on, because they are aware that the stipulations of the unit standards and the registration of the assessors are not a sufficient basis for the awarding of a qualification. Similarly, learnerships are increasingly being registered with 'curricula', not in the usual sense of the term, but in the sense of a stipulation far more detailed than that in the unit standards of what should be learnt and how it should be assessed. This is because people in the system, who believe in the system, are increasingly aware that the outcomes and assessment criteria captured in unit standards are not a sufficient basis for designing a learning programme. While all this work is being done in the name of the system, and in an attempt to get it to work, it in fact shows that it is unlikely to work, at least not in the ways that it has been conceptualized.

Moderation would also have to be unrealistically detailed. For quality assurance bodies to be able to issue national certificates for qualifications which have been entirely assessed internally, by 'registered assessors', in 'accredited providers', against different assessment processes and approaches, possibly against entirely different syllabuses or learning programmes, every assessment process, for the conceivable future, would have to be extensively moderated. Quality assurance bodies would have to have armies of moderators, to be deployed to the thousands of providers and workplaces around the country. All these moderators would have to have subject expertise in the appropriate fields, as well as expertise in assessment. Logistically, this approach would require more resources and time spent on checking up on the system than would be put into actual provision. [12]

These problems will probably not affect the higher education system much, nor the general schooling system. This is because in higher education institutions, although subject to increasing checks and balances, will continue to be responsible for the design and assessment of their programmes, and the issuing of their certificates. In schooling, the Department of Education will design the syllabus, and, while there is an increasing move to have a component of the final qualification assessed at a school level, there will still be national exams, which will be moderated by Umalusi as it and Safcert has done in the past. The problem is in vocational institutions, both public and private, where the idea has been that they will each design their own programme against the unit standards, design and conduct

[12] It is true that in various other countries assessment is conducted internally at secondary levels in the system. However, for such a system to function, there needs to be a high level of professionalism in the lecturing staff, and a large degree of trust built up over time. It might be possible for South Africa to gradually move to such a system.

their own assessment, and then expect Umalusi (or, for occupationally specific qualifications) to issue certificates, after accrediting them as a provider and moderating their assessment. This system is clearly unworkable. For an ETQA like Umalusi to issue certificates, there must be a common assessment task, which entails, to some extent, a common stipulated syllabus, and not simply a list of learning outcomes against which a range of different learning programmes can be designed. Besides being unworkable, this system is not even a basis for equivalence between different vocational programmes from different providers, never mind equivalence between vocational and academic provision. It is also likely to channel increasing energy and resources into assessment and quality assurance, instead of focusing on improving the curricula, learning resources, et cetera, of vocational programmes.

The particular mechanisms which we have introduced in our attempt to create parity, and to certificate as equal different kinds of knowledge and skills, seem to be driving us towards a system in which assessment and quality assurance processes are overloaded, and absorb resources which would be better spent on increasing access and improving provision. There are great limits to what quality assurance can do, conceptually and logistically. Conceptually, it can only be a check on a system; it cannot create quality, or even always locate poor quality. Logistically, it cannot examine all programmes at all institutions. The degree of detail required to issue certificates against internally designed and conducted assessment is simply not viable, or even desirable, in the secondary vocational education sector. The processes and resources that would be involved in registering assessors, accrediting institutions, and quality assuring assessment processes, suggest that quality assurance is more important than provision—and so the means become the end!

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper I have examined the tendency for vocational programmes to have lower status than academic qualifications, and I have argued that attempts to change public perception have not always been successful. I have also argued that while the notion of the 'divide' between academic and vocational programmes, which is an increasing concern of governments and educationalists, varies from country to country, and depends on institutional arrangements, contextual factors such as the role of the state and the structure of the labour market, but also, on the amount of general academic education in or before vocational programmes, and the knowledge base of vocational programmes themselves.

I have then examined the South African NQF, as an example of an outcomes-based qualification-driven reform approach which has had as one of its aims the creation of parity and integration between academic and vocational programmes, as well as between education learnt through formal programmes (academic or vocational), and education learnt informally. It was hoped that an outcomes-based qualification-driven system would do away with the problem of certain qualifications having lower status than others in society. I have shown three major ways in which this is flawed. Our standards-based system tends to undermine the differences between curriculum knowledge (or vertical discourses), in which different areas have their own structures, which are valuable because they enable abstraction, generalization, and prediction, and everyday knowledge, which does not operate in the same way. This is particularly a problem in vocational education programmes, which have often not been conceptualized off a strong knowledge base to start with, and is also a problem for attempting to create parity, as it blurs where the real differences and problems are. The standards-based system under estimates the importance of institutions in education, by assuming that that everything that needs to be learnt and assessed can be stated upfront, and can be measured

through an assessment process. This is not actually how education works; it places too much emphasis on assessment, and quality assurance processes. Again, this is particularly a problem for vocational education, which does not have a strong institutional history. In addition, the quality assurance requirements needed for this to function will be totally impractical. Thus, just as in schooling, in order to have some basis of parity within vocational education, as well as between vocational and academic education, we will need to have some degree of externally prescribed syllabi and assessment tasks. Finally, I argue that while striving to create an anti-authoritarian system, South Africans are in fact engaged in building a highly prescriptive and controlling system.

I want to stress here that one of the dangers of attempting to create parity by decree is that it can ignore the very real problems with vocational programmes. One of the fundamental problems with South Africa's NQF is that in attempting to build mechanisms for equivalence, we have built a system which undermines formal educational provision as well as the knowledge base of vocational and academic education. Thus, while it was developed with an analysis that many programmes are poor quality, or elitist, and that knowledge has been misused in apartheid South Africa, it is not in fact an adequate mechanism to change those bad practices. It focuses resources and energy away from the most important areas of an education and training system.

While done in the name of equality, inclusion, and development, it is unlikely to contribute to any of these noble aims. But because it was developed by a liberation movement which had taken power from an illegitimate regime that had manipulated education and training in various ways, and because the liberation movement had a strong social programme to create a more egalitarian society, and because the NQF is rhetorically compatible with that programme, it has been very difficult to criticize. The intentions have become confused with the policy mechanisms, and because the former are embraced by most of us, it has been assumed that the latter must as well. South Africa was not the first country to make these mistakes; we do, however, appear to have not been very good at learning from other's mistakes. I hope that in this paper I have made some contribution to cautioning other countries to think very carefully before jumping on the trendy bandwagon of outcomes-based qualifications-driven reform.

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