

Parity of esteem: hope or despair?

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Abstract

The context of an appropriate 21st century education and training system is changing almost as rapidly as modern technology. Questions are being raised, on the one hand, about the ways in which education can become more relevant to the world of work and, on the other hand, how vocationally oriented training could become more valued. With this as the background, the South African National Qualifications Framework promotes the integration of education and training. Quite apart from the historical reasons for the desire to integrate education and training in South Africa, internationally, there seems to be a drive towards a more responsive approach to the needs of society, workplaces and, most importantly, individual learners. One such aspect of this drive is to achieve parity of esteem between different components of the system (i.e. education and training), and the different sites of learning (i.e. institutional and workplace).

This paper will address a number of related issues in terms of parity of esteem between vocational and general education 'standards', including (1) discussing the notion of similarity versus comparability and (2) exploring the notion of epistemology versus relationships. The paper will also explore the extent to which deeply entrenched views of education and training may be inhibiting innovative approaches to systemic, epistemological and curricular changes that could enhance the establishment of comparable, if not equivalent, standards for education and training.

Introduction

The context of an appropriate 21st century education and training system is changing almost as rapidly as modern technology. Questions are being raised, on the one hand, about the ways in which education can become more relevant to the world of work and, on the other

hand, how vocationally oriented training could become more valued. With this as the background, the South African National Qualifications Framework promotes the integration of education and training. Quite apart from the historical reasons for the desire to integrate education and training in South Africa, such as the legacy of a system marked 'by division, inequality, segmentation, centralisation and poor accessibility' (Manganyi, 1996:1), internationally, there seems to be a drive towards a more responsive approach to the needs of society, workplaces, and most importantly, individual learners. This is an on-going debate in South Africa, reflected in the calls for closer links between education and training, parity of esteem between different components of the system (i.e. education and training), and the different sites of learning (i.e. institutional and workplace), greater access to meaningful learning pathways and the improvement of the skills base of the country. Yet, in contrast with the international trend to develop approaches that will unify education and training (or academic and vocational learning) (Raffe, 2005), in South Africa, there seems to be an increasing move away from the first principles of the NQF: of integration, of mobility and meaningful progression through comparable standards, and of enhanced access to education, training and employment opportunities.

This paper will attempt to address these issues from a different perspective. This perspective is one that is derived from questioning the assumptions from which we are proceeding and hopes to explore whether, in fact, we are asking the right questions in relation to integration, standards and parity of esteem.

Four questions will deal with these issues. The first question is—what are our assumptions? The second question will briefly explore current realities. The third asks—what is it that we want to achieve? Finally, the fourth and the most difficult question asks—what are the possible ways to achieve integration, portability, meaningful learning pathways and consequently, parity of esteem?

Parity of esteem

I have read the recently published Umalusi report *Apples and Oranges? A comparison of school and college subjects* (2006), with great interest and an increasing feeling of despair. I found that I had to agree with Young, (2003:10) who says that 'parity of esteem is not a reality in any country'—let alone in a country where the emerging education and training system is struggling to shake off the results of possibly the most pernicious inequalities in education provision in the world. The apartheid system of education and training was not the result of 'benign neglect', but a response to a purposeful and deliberate attempt to keep millions of people 'in their place' (Blom, 2006). Young (1996: 33) points out that parity of esteem 'in theory, guarantee equal opportunities and progression regardless of the learning pathway chosen' and that such a strategy 'would point out how vocational and technical programmes would need to be improved'. In South Africa this takes on a very special meaning, linked to social justice issues, as well as to the quality of education and training. Mehl (2004: 22) says that this stems from the way in which 'society recognizes, rewards and measures learning achievements... It is society that provides ultimate validation of qualifications and accords respect to the bearer. Society awards status and also opportunity and privilege'. The apartheid education and training system skewed these 'customary societal norms' along the lines of race, class and gender.

The findings of the Umalusi study therefore strongly confirm what we know about the weaknesses in our Further Education and Training system—particularly in our vocational education and training system. In Cycle 1 of the NQF Impact Study (SAQA, 2004), for example, learners at a large public Further Education and Training College took part in a focus group for the Impact Study, and made the comments that:

Colleges are regarded as inferior.

[and]

We have a problem with doing N3 courses, because when we approach a university, they tell us that the N3 is not a proper Matric and that we cannot be admitted.

Likewise, lecturers at the same college noted:

The NATED programmes are not relevant. We are not offering programmes that are relevant to learners. Maybe industry is not pushing us hard enough.

The Umalusi report confirms these views and notes that in fact, the technical college qualifications (vocational qualifications) were originally ‘designed to be an easier alternative’ (Umalusi, 2006: 1) and were therefore never meant to have the same esteem as a general/academic Higher Grade matriculation.

The extent to which the apartheid education and training system has impacted on the quality of learning, the status and esteem of graduates, is evident to this day, 12 years after the first free elections in 1994. At the Portfolio Committee meeting of Parliament on the 15th of May 2006, for example, in light of discussions about the critical skills needs of our country a member of the Parliamentary Committee, asked the Minister of Education, Naledi Pandor:

...what [is] being done to correct the perception that those who choose vocational training are of lesser intelligence...?

This brings us to the sub-theme of this conference: *thinking about standards over time, across subjects, and across learning paths*. The Umalusi report suggests that standards between general/academic schooling and vocational college education are not comparable. These findings lead to a number of recommendations important to a quality assurance body, but I am of the opinion that the most important findings of the study are not made explicit.

In my view the most important finding is: **at present standards are not comparable; currently, parity of esteem is not a reality.**

However, what struck me is that the Umalusi report is perhaps a vindication of deeply entrenched views of education and training which seem to inhibit the development of innovative approaches to systemic, epistemological and curricular reforms that could enhance and support the establishment of comparable, if not equivalent, standards for education and training. The report seems to suggest that the NQF is at fault, that the NQF

has not had an impact on vocational education in South Africa. Of course, one can argue that this is entirely correct—but not for the reasons that the report puts forward.

Van Rooyen, (2006:2) notes, for example, that

...over the past 25 years vocational education has been suffering from neglect and gross mismanagement by both the present and past governments. Although the technical colleges were administered provincially, changes in curriculum were usually initiated from the national government offices. The curriculum for technical occupations were never reviewed [for more than] 20 years and institutional (practical) training was totally neglected.

And this brings me to the questions I want to raise in this paper:

- What seem to be the assumptions?
- What are the realities?
- What do we want to achieve with our new education and training system?
- What are the ways in which we can achieve these?

What are the assumptions?

The most important assumption is that any teaching and learning in South Africa in the further education and training (FET) band, i.e. in schools and vocational colleges, at present adequately prepare learners for further and higher education¹.

This assumption should be questioned. The Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMMS 1994/1995) and its Repeat (TIMMS-R 1998/1999) for example, found from a descriptive analysis of 194 South African schools and 8141 pupils that (Howie, 2002: 4):

South African pupils performed significantly worse [in mathematics and science] than all the other participating countries in TIMMS-R including other developing countries.

There is no significant difference in the performance of the South African pupils in 1998 [the Repeat] and those in 1995 [the year of the first assessment].

While it must be acknowledged that much has certainly been done in schools in the 8 years following these results, most notably in the areas of infrastructure and increased enrolments (Jansen, 2002), it should be noted that the new National Senior Certificate (NSC), (the FETC General/Academic) is only to be implemented for the first time in 2008. In addition, the 'old' Senior Certificate examination has been in steady decline since 1997 (SAUVCA, 2001), meaning that less learners reach 'Matric', despite improved enrolment figures at the lower end of the system. In addition, in a report commissioned by SAUVCA (now HESA) on *The Challenges of Access and Admissions* (2001: 13) it is noted that

¹ The Umalusi report explicitly does not attempt to address the occupationally based qualifications and these are therefore excluded for the moment.

The pressure on [provincial] departments [of education] to improve their overall Senior Certificate pass rates encourages them preferentially to register students for non-matriculation endorsement subject combinations, which has translated into a smaller number of higher grade candidates, with concomitant increase in standard grade. This has led to an overall increase in the higher grade pass rate. Alongside this, the performance in standard grade is very poor.

Consequently, the HE sector feels constrained to increase participation in university study by the 'large number of learners who are underprepared' and 'the lack of reliability or trustworthiness of matric results' (SAUVCA, 2001: 20, 21).

It is therefore simply still too soon to say whether the new (NQF) qualification will improve learners' preparedness. Not even the Higher Education (HE) sector, as the recipients of learners graduating with the new NSC, can predict whether this will be the case. Instead, HE has consistently noted that the current matriculation certificate is not a good predictor of success in higher education.

However, the same cannot be said of the FET colleges. The new Further Education and Training Certificate (Vocational), which is meant to replace the old NATED qualifications offered at the colleges, is in its final stages of development as we speak. The Umalusi study therefore compared vocational qualifications and curricula (and assessment regimes), which are widely acknowledged as out-dated, weaker even than current school subjects, and irrelevant to the world of work, with current matriculation subjects—which are also subject to change. It is therefore fair to say that:

...the lack of progress in developing the new college-oriented FET Certificate makes it impossible to judge the depth and power of the Department's educational vision for the [vocational] sector (McGrath, 2002).

In addition, many studies have suggested that colleges have considerable room for improvement. A National Business Initiative (NBI) survey indicated that 'the overall pass rate [in colleges] nationally stood at 53 per cent in 2000 and throughput rate at 47 per cent' (Powel & Hall, 2002: 77, in Mc Grath, *et al*).

Further, the language of instruction for 79 per cent of the student population in 2000 at the time of the NBI study would have been a second or third language. The TIMMS-R results for example, indicate that 'language of learning was found to be a significant predictor of pupils' achievement in South Africa; and those classes where the language predominantly used was the same as the language of the test, achieved higher mathematics scores' (Howie, 2002: 5). This is not the case for the majority of current learners in the vocational education sector.

I am therefore of the opinion that the weaknesses in current vocational education provisioning has very little to do with the South African NQF—it has more to do with the fact that we allowed the perpetuation of an old system which did not meet the needs of any of the three categories of learners in the vocational education market: the pre-employed; the currently employed; and the unemployed (Kraak, 2004):

...technical colleges provided poor pre-employment training with very low placement rates. In addition, the apprenticeship system, as a form of employment induction, is in severe decline (p. 120).

Yet, the Umalusi report states that (2006: 2):

...it was hoped that the status of vocational education would be raised through the introduction of an ambitiously designed National Qualifications Framework (NQF). By designating that qualifications were all at level four on the NQF, the level of Grade 12 qualifications, it was thought that the status of all qualifications at that level would be the same and that all qualifications at level four could lead to higher education programmes...

My strong contention is that it is impossible to say whether the status of vocational education will be raised, simply because the system has not yet implemented the new qualifications, curricula, learning programmes and articulation routes needed to enhance parity of esteem.

Minister Pandor, for example, stated in the debate on the 15th May Parliamentary Portfolio Committee that

Further work needed to be put into educating the public, as the perception of FET Colleges as "lower-class" was indeed disappointing, and to ensuring that the teaching at higher education institutions was more closely aligned to allow greater mobility.

What are the realities?

The reality is that the skills crisis has arrived; that the ideal of 'vital intermediate to higher-level skills and competencies the country needs to chart its own course in the global competitive world of the 21st century' (RSA, 1998:14) has not been achieved—we have been 'sleeping while the beds are burning' (Talking Heads). Minister Pandor, for example, reported at the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee that the FET colleges Bill 'was [only!] gazetted last week as part of the plan to re-cast colleges on the critical edges of high skills training'. Yet, Chisholm already noted in 1992 that

...the South African system of vocational training provision has always been characterised by a weak and fragmented education-led, college-based system and an almost non-existent employer-led work-based system. Added to this, issues of economic growth and the development of high level skills have always been absent features in the story of technical and industrial education provision in South Africa (in Badroodien, 2004: 44).

The opportunity to reform this situation and the promise that vocational education in South Africa held for the economic and social development of the country and for individuals in the late 1980's, was constrained by the political situation of the time, a fragmented qualification structure for the sector and 'low trust' between the social partners (Kraak, 2004: 47). Coupled with the lack of policy coherence and co-ordination of training efforts, the vocational sector was in need of critical reform. In 2006 this is still the case: the articulation of education and training courses is still constrained; there is still 'an absence of links between the training system and the formal education system'. In fact, if the report *An*

interdependent National Qualifications Framework System Consultative Document (DoE & DoL, 2003: 14) is anything to go by, then the links still have to be established:

Learning pathways cannot be sealed off from one another, as though a learner is fated to stay on one route once a choice has been made. The principle of flexibility must ensure that links are available for learners to move from one pathway to another, to be credited appropriately with learning achievements that are relevant to the new pathway and be afforded the opportunity to acquire additional learning that would enable the learner to make an efficient transition

Learners in the public FET college focus group for Cycle 1 of the NQF Impact Study (SAQA, 2004) noted 'we don't need these courses anyway, as people without these courses can get the same jobs' and '[the colleges] do not give us all the required training to work in large companies'.

I am of the opinion, and the Umalusi report confirms this opinion, that the vocational education sector is still in trouble.

But what are some of the other realities, particularly in the so-called occupationally based sector? Hundreds of occupationally directed qualifications have been developed, including a large number of Further Education and Training Certificates (FETCs). Hundreds of learnerships have been developed and implemented. Yet, the status of these achievements is uncertain, particularly from Umalusi's quality assurance point of view. But so too is the status of the vocational education system. Kraak (2004:121) notes that

...the previous apprenticeship system, which had very loose requirements regarding the linkage between theoretical training and work experience. Most often in the past, apprentices would undergo a minimal level of theoretical training at a technical college (acquiring certificates N1 to N3 [equivalent to Grades 10 to 12], which were often unrelated to their practical training) with little supervision or structured induction into skilled work at their places of employment.

In a pilot study undertaken by the National Access Consortium Western Cape (NACWC) (2001: 87) the weaknesses of the current FET sector were confirmed yet again:

...in the college sector, sharp differences can be discerned between 'practical' subjects and 'theory' subjects in terms of methodology, classroom practice and assessment. Theory-based courses tend to be characterised by and limited to delivery from teacher to student, and are dominated by national examinations that determine who passes and who fails. [Students undertake informal hours in a workplace and] the college therefore plays no role in monitoring the student to see who eventually qualifies or not, or in seeing how their delivery has impacted on the learner's workplace performance.

But where, in the pilot, Engineering courses, which 'traditionally effectively separated theory and practical training, were brought together into a year-long programme that integrates theory and practice', and combined this programme with communications, computer literacy and entrepreneurship, in a precursor to the learnership system, it became evident that the

range of skills learners would gain from the qualification was considerably broadened (NACWC, 2001).

However, public FET colleges are not encouraged to offer occupationally based qualifications, and certainly will not be funded by the Department of Education to offer such. This means that the colleges, which are well placed to develop a responsive sector to the world of work, will be constrained in their contribution to the emerging occupationally based routes to qualifications—resulting possibly in yet again, stratified statuses for education and training, with the National Senior Certificate at the top, the FETC Vocational in second place, and the occupationally-based FETCs at the bottom of the rung.

Is this what we want to achieve?

I am of the opinion that the FET sector finds itself in the unique space where it can prevent new systemic disparities between the sub-sectors. In other words, the sector is in flux, major changes are on their way. This space offers important opportunities to lift the value of particularly, vocational and occupationally based education and training. Now is not the time to systemically entrench an old system by disparaging some components of the system and by producing a report, which smacks of a particular bias, based on an acknowledged outdated system in need of crucial reform.

If we could therefore firstly acknowledge that there is much work to be done, in all of the sub-sectors of further education and training, then we can start developing innovative ways of complementarity. According to the Consultative Document (DoE & DoL, 2003: 6, 7):

Educators recognise the importance of career preparation but stress that preparation for work must be embedded in programmes of much broader educational value for individual and social development...Workplace learning practitioners elevate the importance of work for sustaining and enhancing life and society, recognise the value of fundamental education, but argue that work-readiness and work competence are best acquired through learning that is embedded in real work experience.

...the tension between these positions has seemed at times to polarise viewpoints and exasperate relations between the protagonists. But each perspective...has merit. They are not in fact opposites, but equally essential facets of the same national learning system. The National Qualifications Framework is a vital mechanism for holding the tension between them and bringing out the complementary and mutually reinforcing attributes of institutional and workplace learning. It is necessary to stand above simplistic dichotomies and attempt to understand more holistically the interface between the two worlds especially since both are undergoing rapid change...The further development of the NQF can be approached in such a manner that respects the different modes of learning and encourages collaboration and inter-dependence...without compromising the unique value each learning perspective brings to the whole.

What is it that we want to achieve?

The value of the Umalusi report, in my opinion, is that it creates an awareness of a crippling symptom of the education and training sector of the apartheid era. However, it is clear that the problems facing the Further Education and Training (FET) band are much more wide-ranging and potentially may have a much greater impact on our emerging system. An evaluation of the FET band needs to take into consideration all the contextual factors that may influence our decisions, including an acknowledgement that much work needs to be done, and that nothing will happen by itself. The people and organisations who have been given the responsibility for our emerging system, will have to approach the problems of the FET band from a different perspective, including looking at factors such as learning, delivery, epistemology, articulation, progression and parity of esteem in relation to the needs of individuals and society—and then seek ways to align the whole sector with these needs.

The Departments of Education and Labour, in their initial joint response to the *Report of the Study Team on the Implementation of the National Qualifications Framework* (2002: 15), say that 'a Further Education and Training Certificate (FETC) must equip learners for further learning either at work or in higher education' and propose three pathways: General, General Vocational, and Trade, Occupational and Professional (TOP) (2003: 15).

The theory is that the General 'track' and the General Vocational 'track' enables 'portability of learning credits...to permit articulation with other learning pathways' but the report cautions that '[i]t has not yet been clarified how the FET schools programme will articulate with that of the colleges' (2003: 15). Likewise the TOP pathway 'would in principle permit workers to achieve a level 4 qualification and proceed beyond that current glass ceiling to level 5 and subsequent qualifications without leaving the workplace' (2003: 16). To ensure that the pathways are 'not walled off from the next, an articulation column is created between them to enable vertical, horizontal and diagonal articulation between qualifications' (2003: 17).

According to the Departments the FET system will therefore serve the pre-employed, the employed and the unemployed 'who are seeking to enter or progress in or change a career pathway, or equip themselves for admission to higher education, or both' (2003: 14).

Diagrammatically, this is represented as follows (DoE & DoL, 2003: 17):

Table 1: Proposed revised National Qualifications Framework

NOF Band	General/academic	Articulation	General/vocational	Articulation	Trade/occupational/ professional
HE	Discipline-based	Credits	Career-focused	Credits	Occupational recognition or context-based workplace qualifications
FE	Discipline-based	Credits	Vocational qualifications	Credits	

GE	General education qualifications
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How is articulation, progression and parity of esteem and consequently, the recognition of credits attained in different parts of the system, to take place? What credits could be transferred between the 'tracks'?

Table 2: Articulation and credit transfer routes from general/academic to occupationally-based qualifications

NQF Band	General/academic	Articulation	General/vocational	Articulation	Trade/occupational/ professional
HE	Discipline-based	Credits	Career-focused	Credits	Occupational recognition or context-based workplace qualifications
FE	Discipline-based	Credits	Vocational qualifications	Credits	
GE	General education qualifications				

Theoretically then, a learner who started off in the general/academic track, but who wanted to move towards vocational qualifications, could move horizontally at the same level and/or diagonally into career-focused HE. Likewise, a learner who finds him/herself in the vocational track, could move horizontally at the same level and/or diagonally into a context-based HE qualification. This is quite straightforward and I doubt that anyone will dispute mobility of this nature. However, will it also be possible for a learner to move from the opposite end 'of the same national learning system' (DoE & DoL, 2003: 7)?

In other words:

Table 3: Articulation and credit transfer routes from to occupationally-based qualifications to general/academic qualifications

NQF Band	General/academic	Articulation	General/vocational	Articulation	Trade/occupational/ professional
HE	Discipline-based	Credits	Career-focused	Credits	Occupational recognition or context-based workplace qualifications
FE	Discipline-based	Credits	Vocational qualifications	Credits	
GE	General education qualifications				

If this is not what the Consultative Document means with the statement that the new system will enable all learners ‘who are seeking to enter or progress in or change a career pathway, or equip themselves for admission to higher education, or both’ (2003: 14), then I want to suggest that we are not serious about articulation, meaningful progression and parity of esteem through comparable standards, and of enhanced access to education, training and employment opportunities for the full spectrum of learners in the system.

Much education and training provision already reflect that education and training are not opposites. The Consultative Document (DoE & DoL, 2003: 21) reflects this in the discussion of the three pathways and the qualifications within them:

- Partnered pairs of qualifications, for example ‘occupational and professional training in many fields exemplifies this model’
- Stand-alone discipline-based qualification with a component of workplace practice, for example the ‘co-operative education model’
- Stand-alone occupational context-based qualifications with a component of discipline-based study, for example ‘learnership programmes illustrate this type of partnership’.

Diagrammatically, this is represented as follows:

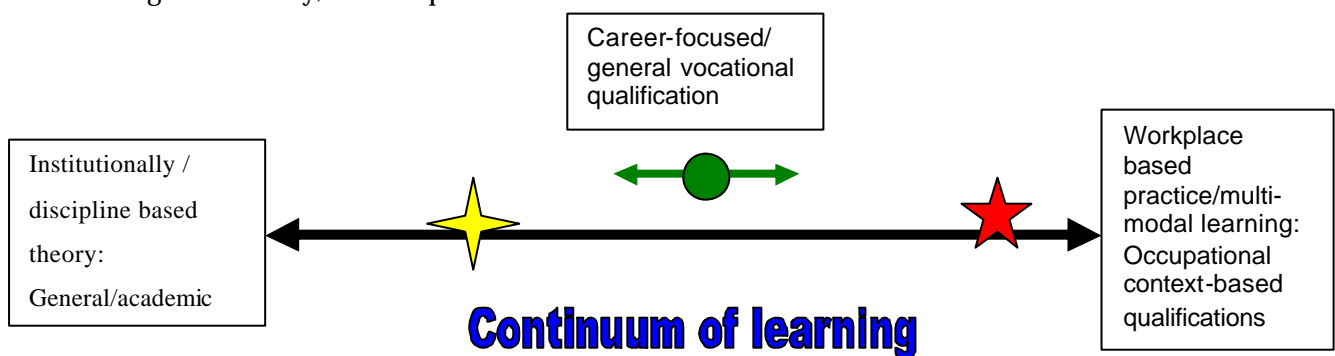


Figure 1: A continuum of learning

The extent to which the purposes and rationale of a qualification are defined by the pursuit of discipline based learning (education) or by the utility value in the workplace (training), places a qualification (or set of related qualifications) in a particular place along the continuum. The yellow star in Figure 1, for example, indicates that a particular qualification is mostly about the development of discipline-based knowledge, but with some tentative links to the world of work. The red star, for a qualification at the opposite end of the continuum would therefore be much more occupationally oriented.

However, there are not only these two extremes. A third dimension: a ‘career-focused’ or ‘general vocational’ qualification, which ‘looks both ways’ is also conceptualized (DoE & DoL, 2003). This type of qualification is reflected as the green arrow (Blom, 2006).

I believe it is time to start asking the harder questions:

Are the difficulties we are experiencing in achieving parity of esteem as a result of 'a positional good' (or put differently - perhaps power struggles and vested interests)?

A positional good is one whose value declines as other people have more and more of it. In a credentialist society qualifications are a positional good, and a reform which aims to raise the status of vocational [and occupationally-based] qualifications (and increase their value) threatens to undermine the positional value of academic qualifications. It therefore threatens the institutions which deliver academic qualifications and the social groups which most often achieve them (Raffe, 2005: 27).

Dare I ask whether the apparent unwillingness to look at alternatives to the traditional organisation of education and training is perhaps simply power play? If this is not the case, or even if it is, should we not seriously consider that it is 'necessary to stand above simple dichotomies and attempt to understand more holistically the interface between the two worlds' (DoE & DoL, 2003: 7)?

How do we achieve parity of esteem?

Perhaps it is time to acknowledge that we need to look at these issues with a different lens—to acknowledge that we cannot hold onto views that fly in the face of international trends, that if we want to solve the skills crisis of the country, and of unemployment and lack of progression, we cannot afford for vocational and occupationally-based qualifications to be considered for those people of 'lesser intelligence'. We have to find ways of raising the 'positional good' of all qualifications. This will not be possible without deliberate, sustained effort from all involved.

This effort will have to take place at all levels of education and training. On a macro level, we need to do the long-overdue analysis of legislation governing the different components of education and training and undertake the clarifications and interpretations that will take the system forward, as opposed to being used as a tool to say 'who is the boss?'

On a meso level, we need to ensure that the qualifications themselves contain internal consistencies and specify transferable credits. Theoretically, all Further Education and Training Certificates (FETCs), namely the new National Senior Certificate: Schooling; the National Certificate: Vocational and the FETC: Occupationally-based, have a comparable structure: Fundamentals, Core and Electives, with the Fundamentals being the base and minimum benchmark. We therefore need to collectively build in, and specify credit transfer and articulation possibilities.

On a micro level, we have to make sense of learning outcomes, curricula, learning programmes and assessment regimes in order to make meaningful comparisons. Crucially, we need to capacitate education and training practitioners.

Then we have to strengthen, not disparage, new areas of knowledge-production. Experts must get involved in seeking to strengthen poorly defined areas of knowledge production

and establish a functional and knowledge taxonomy in sectors where strong disciplinary based traditions do not exist (Mehl, 2004).

On all levels, we have to build trust, we have to share practice, we have to think in terms of the system and the learners within them. We have to build quality assurance mechanisms that will enhance learning—wherever this may occur—and recognise the value and contribution it makes to the economic and social development of the country as a whole.

We have to ask ourselves the most difficult question: Have we done enough of the hard thinking to do the hard work? I do not believe we have.

Conclusion

Albert Einstein said:

You cannot solve a problem with the same thinking that created it.

In the light of this famous statement, perhaps parity of esteem needs to be clarified. In my view, it does not mean that the widely differing purposes of qualifications should be ignored or devalued. It also does not mean that curricula, learning programmes, assessment regimes, modes of delivery will be the same, or even similar. It does, however, mean that as a system, we value all learning, regardless of where it was attained and that the system therefore, should not entrench a previously (discredited) view of education, training and workplace learning. Instead, the system should enable meaningful comparisons of standards over time, across subjects, and across learning paths.

I want to argue that the problem is with the model, reflecting a particular bias, not the principle of parity of esteem. Raffe, (2005: 26) says

The argument is further confused by being polarised in terms of education and training—or rather, in terms of *caricatures* of education and training.

Is parity of esteem an intractable ideal? Perhaps, but I personally will not believe that this is the case until all avenues have been explored.

So, the first assumption dealing with the FET band should be that there is much work to be done—including the work that will enhance parity of esteem, but even more importantly, the work to raise the quality of all FET education and training.

This assumption is based on the realities of the sector that has somehow remained neglected—9 years after the introduction of a National Qualifications Framework. Our work should therefore be focused on what it is that we want to achieve—and how this may impact on individuals' lives, the communities within which they find themselves, the economy that sustains such communities, and the wider social justice goals of transformation, redress and improved access to education and training and employment opportunities.

Perhaps, at this point, it is time to remind ourselves of the goals of our emerging education and training system and remember why these goals were important at the time. If the goals of an integrated, high quality education and training system that will facilitate access, mobility and progression for the individuals in the system in order to achieve their full personal development, no longer holds, then we should develop new objectives. If, however, these are still true, then we have to find ways in which to make this possible.

I agree with Raffe (2005) that it at this juncture, it is time to 'identify and overcome the barriers to progress, to plan the evolution of the qualifications framework, and of the wider education and training system...and to manage and steer this evolution. In other words, the...challenge is to envision, motivate and manage the change' as partners, not opponents, in South Africa's education and training system.

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