

The NQF: Learning to live, living to learn

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Introduction

The 'big idea' of the NQF, which the country endorsed in 1995, was perceived as *the* instrument for the development of a lifelong learning culture in the country. Who were the people who were top of mind at this time, why was lifelong learning highlighted and what did it mean? Has it still got relevance?

The NQF was the result of a range of different social, economic and political interests which all agreed that change was necessary. Poor, working class, and middle class rural and urban black people, women, and people with disabilities, across all ages i.e. those who had been disadvantaged, marginalized and exploited by the previous regime, were at the forefront of thinking. Lifelong learning was understood to be an important philosophy and approach to move from the divisive, exploitative and discriminatory practices of apartheid, to a transformed culture where a new set of educational values and principles would hold sway – these included: *integration* across education and training; *access* to education and training for the majority throughout their lives; *mobility* across education, training, work and development; *progression* along rational, people centred pathways; *quality* provision; *redress* to correct the centuries of injustice; and people centred *development*. These became the objectives of the NQF and have been reaffirmed as the goals of the new NQF fifteen years later. A tall order in anybody's book!

So how far have people's lives improved and how far have we moved towards these new principles and understandings? What kinds of debates and contestations have been occurring as we grapple with this massive transformation agenda? I will not try to answer these questions, as I think these are partly questions for this meeting (and many future meetings), but let's keep in mind some of our realities in South Africa:

- Middle-income country
- Large proportion of young people (51% below 25)
- Life expectancy in 2007 was 50 years (with impact of HIV and AIDS)
- 45% live below national poverty line
- Unemployment rate between 25% and 40%

- Great polarity between rich and poor
- Democratic constitution with strong human rights aspirations and active civil society
- We believe we are exceptional
- We believe in magic!

As a generalization, we as South Africans are inclined towards an anti-intellectualism; to emphasize political solutions; and to believe in magic. We often argue our `exceptionalism`; how we are different from others, and how, if we make a political decision it will somehow translate into deep transformation 'magically', without the careful, long term, systematic, hard work that is required to transform ways of thinking and behaving.

But we are beginning to learn. In the last few years, there is increasing realization that research based approaches to policy and practice, are essential, and that change happens through long term, sustained commitment and hard work.

NQF

In relation to the NQF our early ambitious views of the NQF have been replaced by more modest views. We have come to understand that the NQF is one of several instruments needed to transform deeply held pedagogical, political and organisational practices, which seek to challenge dominant relationships of power in the society.

We are now more inclined to see the NQF, not as a magic wand, but as an instrument to help facilitate change through enabling **communication, coordination and cooperation** across education, training, work and development, so that `communities of trust` can grow, and new ways of thinking and acting may result. Our late colleague, Ben Parker and I, in a co-authored article in 2008, put it like this:

“NQFs are best understood as works-in-progress and as contestable artefacts of modern society, which can contribute in a modest way to how a society manages the relations amongst education, training, work and development by finding ‘common ground’ between distinct forms of learning and articulation with work and development practices. They are useful vehicles for communication, cooperation and coordination across education, training, work and development.”

Imbedded within this formulation is an understanding of transformation not as 'an event'; it understands transformation as involving complex personal, political, organisational and pedagogical relationships and processes across deep chasms of difference; and that educational transformation is certainly not something that happens quickly. It also recognises that qualifications in any society are important forms of currency with which various groups transact understandings and relationships of power and privilege. The NQF is seen as an extremely important vehicle to enable various interest groups to communicate, negotiate, debate, contest and mediate meanings to find 'common ground', both within the country and trans-nationally. The NQF is about people, organisations, systems, policies, and regulations in the interests of deepening the possibilities for a quality lifelong learning experience for people from 'cradle to grave'.

But how far have we debated the philosophy and approaches to lifelong learning? Or have we got caught up in debating the NQF as a technical instrument, forgetting the reasons for establishing it? Are the initial lifelong learning impulses still relevant? What does lifelong learning mean?

Lifelong learning

There are various and competing understandings of the social purposes of LLL and I don't intend rehearsing them here. I will make a few comments. Firstly, LLL is not a new idea. It goes back to ancient civilizations across time and space, where the necessity of human beings (and other life forms) to continue to learn and teach, is part of sustaining life. To go back to one ancient classical text of Confucius from what is today China around 500 BC, who says that human pursuit of learning and development extends to the end of life and is of profound significance – what we might paraphrase as learning to live, living to learn. He said,

“At 15 I set my heart upon learning. At 30 I planted my feet firm upon the ground. At forty, I no longer suffered from perplexities. At 50 I knew what were the biddings of Heavens. At 60 I heard them with docile ear. At 70 I could follow the dictates of my heart, for what I desired no longer overstepped the boundaries of right”.

Looking back over his life, Confucius told us that life is a constant process of pursuit and development. The starting point of such conscious pursuit is 'to set one's heart upon learning'. He emphasizes that realization of the need for learning and setting goals play a key role in life's

development and the different stages of life require us to learn different things. He said that the highest level of learning is `to have access to freedom in the real world`. This is different from what many understand lifelong learning to be about today, which relates to meeting the needs of the economy and the need to adapt quickly to labour market requirements.

In contemporary times, one definition which I find helpful is that lifelong learning:

“Connects individuals and groups to the structures of social, political and economic activity in both local and global contexts, and emphasizes women and men, girls and boys, as agents of their own history in all aspects of their lives.” (Adapted from “Cape Town Statement on Characteristics of Lifelong Learning Higher Education Institutions” 2001)

This recognises the importance of us all being conscious, active citizens, who see ourselves as agents in the world; not sitting back, waiting, but striving to understand and act. But is this enough in a time of dire ecological predictions? Increasingly, there is recognition that, as Paul Belanger said recently at the Belem conference, “***The planet will not survive unless it becomes a learning planet***”. (World Conference on Adult Education, Confinte V1, Belem, December 2009). It is about all living beings `learning to live and living to learn`.

LLL in China

I have just returned from Shanghai, China. Shanghai is a city of 18 million (where people do not know that the sky should be blue; and where the major river running through the city is unable to sustain life) – it is a vibrant city which has positioned itself as a ‘learning city’, where lifelong learning is a central part of the mission to build competitive and sustainable futures. In China the scope for lifelong learning is seen to be at least three times larger than that of the formal school population. It adds up to a billion candidates for lifelong learning including 790 million workers, who need to renew their knowledge and skills; 120 million people migrating from rural areas to cities who need to adapt to new work and living environments; and 144 million elderly who want to be active citizens and pursue meaningful and enriched lives.

One of the speakers in Shanghai informed us of various new modes of continuing education that have been created through partnerships of government, schools, communities, industries, enterprises and other organisations. There are continuing education opportunities in rural areas through adult secondary vocational schools and farmers secondary vocational schools; workplace learning involves 90 million per year; there is continuing education for administrative cadres and other professionals in governments, industries and NGOs of women, youth and workers. China has built a distance education and service platform based on satellite, television

network and the internet. The number of distance learning students in regular higher education institutions has reached 1.1 million. There are 3000 universities. 400 provincial learning communities have been set up – schools and universities are urged to incorporate the principles of lifelong learning into the total education system, in order to play their part, as this is considered one of the most important goals of the 21st century.

They are setting up overall legislative frameworks for lifelong learning, which clarify the rights and responsibilities of government, organisations and individuals; they are building a national support and service system that covers both urban and rural areas with the application of ICT including satellite and broadcasting networks and internet; they are exploring a credit accumulation and transfer system; a national qualification system where knowledge, skill and competence are equally weighted and diploma and professional qualifications can be transferred mutually, and so on.

At the Shanghai Lifelong Learning Forum South Africa's NQF was affirmed in the closing declaration with the following statement:

“An equivalency framework - as described in the case of South Africa, a national qualifications framework which helps to deal with issues of access, mobility and quality, and programme development for LLL activities in an integrated way.....This mechanism can function effectively when there are adequate arrangements for coordination, communication and cooperation amongst key stakeholders. Contestations and debates are to be expected, but these can be resolved if there is a shared view about the core objectives and research-based evidence is relied upon”.

There was an appreciation of the need for mechanisms in society to help build linkages and communities of trust across the different parts of the system and the society – the NQF was seen as a useful vehicle for this purpose, and several people wanted to speak to me more about these possibilities.

Back to the future

In the early 1990s South African social and political movements, identified lifelong learning as an important philosophy and approach to help achieve equity, redress and development. However, beyond the NQF and sporadic pockets of practice within certain institutions and groups, there has been little systematisation of an approach to the development of the theory

and practice of lifelong learning. These take consistent hard work and follow through.

From my role as the director of the Division for Lifelong Learning at UWC, where we have the aspiration of realising a lifelong learning university, I have some understanding of what it takes to shift understandings and practices in just one large institution. We have understood that to move beyond a rhetorical allegiance to one which takes lifelong learning on as a serious practice, then all aspects of the university are impacted, including the ways we understand:

- Strategic Partnerships and Linkages
- Overarching Frameworks
- Research
- Teaching and Learning Processes
- Administration Policies and Mechanisms
- Student Support Systems and Services

It involves advocacy in a society where education is thought to be mainly for the young, where a well known expression amongst people of 30 years old in the Western Cape is, “Ek is te oud om te leer”. It challenges understandings of what and whose knowledge counts; of the critical importance of cross generational learning – where one of the greatest challenges is to move beyond the dichotomous thinking of either education for children or for adults, to the conception of their circular interdependence and a notion of ‘for children, youth and adults through different stages of life’; to challenging the idea that LLL is just for older people – as Confucius said those many years ago, encouraging people to see themselves as learners throughout their lives is critical to their development (it will be interesting to know over time what impact for this little girl there may be of her wearing a university track suit at this stage – is this the start of developing lifelong learning graduate attributes?); to developing quality mechanisms and pedagogical strategies for alternative successful access; to acknowledging the importance of quality continuing education, and so on. It involves pedagogical, political and organizational transformation.

If anyone thinks that lifelong education and learning’s ‘sell by dates’ have been reached, you need only go to China to realise just how vibrant and serious the undertakings are. Lifelong learning, and by association NQFs, are certainly not ‘neutral’ but are intimately connected to notions of human and planetary development. Therefore, we can expect that the competing and

contested understandings of 'development' and 'knowledge' will also live within lifelong learning and NQFs, as we see in this quote by an aboriginal Australian woman, Lily Walker. That is why the opportunities to have systematic and sustained dialogue about research based understandings of development, knowledge, teaching and learning, are so important.

This NQF Research Conference is the first under the new dispensation and we are hoping that it becomes a regular feature in the national calendar. As I have said, one of the lessons that we have learnt is that a research-led approach to the conceptual and practical development of the NQF is essential, and that this has to be undertaken together with others. We therefore trust that the next few days will contribute towards building common understandings and communities of trust amongst all of us as researchers. Thank you for your efforts in this regard.

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