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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CHE	Council on Higher Education
CLD	Community Learning and Development
COSATU	Congress of South African Trade Unions
DoE	Department of Education
DoL	Department of Labour
DP	Development Partner
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
EU	European Union
FE	Further Education
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institutions
HEQC	Higher Education Quality Committee
HNC/D	Higher National Certificate and Diploma
NHS	National Health Service
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NSB	National Standards Body
NSE	Norms and Standards for Educators
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
OBET	Outcomes-based Education and Training
PCAS	Policy Co-ordination and Advisory Services
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
SCOTCAT	Scottish Credit Accumulation and Transfer
SCOTVEC	Scottish Vocational Education Council
SCQF	Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework
SGB	Standards Generating Body
SQA	Scottish Qualifications Authority
SQC	Scottish Qualifications Certificate
SVQ	Scottish Vocational Qualifications
SETA	Sector Education and Training Authority
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UK	United Kingdom
VET	Vocational Education and Training

EDITORIAL COMMENT

Couched within the overarching theme of *The NQF as a socially inclusive and cohesive system*, the six speakers at the Second Annual NQF Colloquium held at the Velmoré Conference Centre, Midrand, 10 to 11 August 2006, were asked to prepare papers on the following three sub-themes:

International qualifications frameworks developments

Here the interaction between Jim Gallacher (Co-director, Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning, Glasgow Caledonian University, Scotland) and Samuel Isaacs (Executive Officer, SAQA) offers a useful insight into the role of national and regional qualifications frameworks in introducing change and providing new opportunities for learners. Their papers show that the challenges faced in South Africa are not unique. In particular, they show that the international NQF discourse includes numerous debates on similar challenges as well as the ways in which they were addressed.

The NQF as a community of practice/trust

Collectively, Molapo Qhobela (Chief Director, Higher Education Policy, Department of Education)* and Ben Parker (previously with the University of KwaZulu-Natal, now Deputy Director: Researcher) offer a wealth of experience of the South African education and training system. In their papers, they build on the notions of communities of practice (Etienne Wenger) and communities of trust (Michael Young) and ask to what extent the NQF can be seen as such.

The NQF as a social construct

While the 'social construct' interpretation of the NQF was often heard in the early years of NQF development and implementation in South Africa (Isaacs and Cosser), such voices seem to have receded. Under this sub-theme, Yusef Waghid (University of Stellenbosch, Education Policy Studies) and Mary Metcalfe (University of the Witwatersrand, School of Education) consider whether the NQF can legitimately be referred to as a 'social construct' or whether it is a process which is still in the making.

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* *Paper not included.*

CHAIRPERSON'S FOREWORD

Following the successful First Annual NQF Colloquium hosted by SAQA in 2005, the second Colloquium offered participants important insights into current local and international developments associated with national qualifications frameworks. The Colloquium is also an important vehicle to provide strategic guidance on matters related to NQF development and implementation. Most importantly, the Colloquium creates an opportunity for the academic community to actively engage with policy makers, to constructively critique decisions taken and, in so doing, to continue building the communities of trust that are essential to effective NQF implementation (such as those discussed by Molapo Qhobela and Ben Parker). While we may not all agree that adequate attempts have been made to encourage and accommodate such diverse views to date, there are few who will disagree that opportunities such as the NQF Colloquium are needed.

This year the six speakers were carefully selected, not for the audience to only hear the success stories of NQF developments, but to purposefully subject the NQF to 'the serious public deliberation' Yusef Waghid calls for in his paper. Today, more than ten years after the SAQA Act was promulgated, we (and here I speak as Chair of SAQA) cannot afford to disregard the voice of the academic community; not that this was ever the case, but now more than ever we need to work together to achieve the objectives of the NQF.

SAQA undertakes to publish not only the proceedings of this Colloquium, but also to use the opportunity to establish a joint forward-looking research agenda between SAQA and NQF stakeholders that, in turn, will encourage debate on, and intellectual scrutiny of, topical NQF-related matters.

Shirley Walters
Chairperson: South African Qualifications Authority

August 2006

NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS: INSTRUMENTS OF CHANGE OR AGENTS OF CHANGE?

Jim Gallacher
Co-director, Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning, Glasgow Caledonian University, Scotland

Introduction

This paper will focus on the issue of the role of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) in introducing change and providing new opportunities for learners. In many countries throughout the world, including South Africa, there have been high expectations for the role of NQFs in helping create more accessible and flexible education systems (French, 2005; Young, 2003). However, I would like to question whether the expectations for these NQFs have not been unrealistically high. One of the respondents in our recent evaluation of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) (Gallacher, Toman, Caldwell, Edwards and Raffe, 2005) expressed this view in a succinct and ironic comment noting that '… at the opening ceremony of the SCQF in the Glasgow Conference Centre…the Minister compared it to the discovery of penicillin and landing on the moon – *it's a qualification framework*!' (University Vice-Principal).

The outcome of the evaluations that we have undertaken has led to the conclusion that SCQF can best be understood as an instrument of change rather than an agent of change. David Raffe in his contribution to last year's NQF Colloquium made a related point when he suggested that 'the literature on qualifications frameworks suggests that they are most successful when they are modest in ambition and incremental in approach' (Raffe, 2005:21). I would like to pose the question of the implications of viewing qualification frameworks in this way for future work in developing the NQF in South Africa.

Evaluating the contribution of SCQF to change

It may be useful to begin by briefly reviewing the outcomes of recent evaluations of SCQF that I and my colleagues have undertaken. This may be helpful because SCQF is often considered a relatively successful example of a credit and qualifications framework. A consideration of the achievements of SCQF, the aspects in which progress has been limited, and the challenges that SCQF is facing in moving forward, may help raise some interesting issues in the South African context.

SCQF was established in 2001. The stated aims were to:

- Assist people of all ages and circumstances to access appropriate education and training over their lifetime to fulfil their personal, social and economic potential.

- Enable employers, learners and the general public to understand the full range of Scottish qualifications, how they relate to each other and how different types of qualifications can contribute to improving the skills of the workforce.

These aims were further spelt out by suggesting that SCQF would:
- Make the relationships between qualifications clearer
- Clarify entry and exit points, and routes for progression
- Maximise the opportunities for credit transfer
- Assist learners to plan their progress and learning (SCQF, 2001:1–2).

SCQF builds on two existing sub-frameworks. These were the Higher Still framework introduced in 1999 covering post 16 education and the SCOTCATS framework, a credit accumulation and transfer framework covering Scottish higher education also launched in 1999. It is non regulatory and has been built around the concept of partnership between the key stakeholders. The four original development partners (DPs) were: the Scottish Executive (the Scottish Government); the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) that is responsible for quality in higher education institutions; Universities Scotland, which represents the Scottish University Principals or Vice Chancellors; and the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) that is responsible for all the national qualifications in schools and colleges throughout Scotland (Raffe, 2003).

In 2002, an Implementation Plan was published that outlined a number of objectives and targets to be achieved by March 2006 (SCQF, 2002). The outcomes from this Implementation Plan have recently been evaluated. This evaluation indicates substantial achievements against the objectives, but also areas where achievements have been limited and challenges to be addressed in taking forward the implementation of the Framework (Gallacher *et al.*, 2006). These can be summarised as follows.

Achievements

The framework is in place

The SCQF has successfully established a framework that now includes almost all of the main higher education (HE) and (SQA) qualifications. Almost all of the formal qualifications within the Scottish education system are now included, and structures are in place that will enable others to be included. Alongside this, a significant number of higher education institutions (HEIs) and colleges now refer to SCQF in their prospectuses and websites. The Scottish Qualifications Certificate (SQC) issued by SQA and many transcripts issued by HEIs now contain references to SCQF levels and credits.

Extending the framework

Initially only the universities and SQA had the power to credit rate courses for inclusion

in the Framework. Because of the outcome of a consultation exercise to consider widening the range of organisations with credit rating powers it has now been agreed that Scotland's Further Education Colleges will have these powers. A pilot project has been undertaken to explore the issues associated with awarding these powers to the colleges. The colleges have now also been recognised as Development Partners (DPs) alongside the Quality Assurance Authority (QAA), Scottish Executive, Scottish Qualification Authority (SQA) and Universities Scotland. This has created a precedent for extending the accreditation work of SCQF and augmenting the original DPs.

In connection with recognising learning beyond the formal qualifications associated with SQA and the universities, some progress has been made in establishing Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and some projects are underway to explore the utilisation of these guidelines.

Work has also been undertaken to level and credit rate some qualifications beyond those of SQA and the HEIs. In particular, rating of the qualifications of the Institute of Bankers, the Scottish Childminders Association and the Police College has been completed. Other work is on going in social services, the National Health Service (NHS) and community learning and development (CLD).

Routes for progression and credit transfer

It is recognised that the SCQF guidelines clarify the issues associated with articulation and credit transfer for students who have gained Higher National Certificates and Diplomas (HNC/Ds) in further education (FE) colleges and who wish to progress to degree courses in HEIs. It was not clear from this evaluation whether the SCQF developments have contributed significantly to an increase in the opportunities for credit transfer or whether the number of students who are moving from colleges to HEIs with credit has increased. However, the earlier evaluation of SCQF raised some doubts here (Gallacher *et al.*, 2005).

A Mapping, Tracking and Bridging Project has also been established in attempting to improve the articulation arrangements between colleges and HEIs.

Developments at a European level

At a European level, there is evidence that the well-developed system that exists in Scotland has enabled it to take a leading role in developments associated with the Bologna Process for HE, the Copenhagen Process for vocational education and training (VET), and the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). With these developments, the SCQF has been more active than many other European countries and this is recognised as an important achievement. (The conference held in Glasgow in September 2005 on Qualifications Frameworks in Europe helped consolidate this position).

LIMITATIONS

Limited progress with vocational qualifications, work based learning, professional bodies and employers

There is evidence that progress towards levelling and credit rating vocational qualifications and work based learning has been slow. Even with the Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs) validated by SQA there has been only limited work to embed them in the Framework. By March 2006, 20 had been levelled and credit rated. Delays in this area are associated with the fact that many of these qualifications are UK wide and there is a need to develop a UK solution. This has been difficult in the absence of an equivalent framework in England. It has also been suggested that these delays are associated with the extent to which the work of the Framework has been associated with the 'mainstream' qualifications of colleges and HEIs. As a result, the inclusion of the work based vocational qualifications has not had the same level of priority. A number of respondents, particularly within the social services area, have expressed concerns about the slow progress with the accreditation of work based learning and the absence of clear structures and guidelines for this type of learning.

A related issue has been the involvement of professional and statutory bodies in the Framework. I mentioned the accreditation of Institute of Bankers' qualifications above. However, the outcome of the consultation exercise on extending the right to credit rate to other bodies was not to include professional and statutory bodies at that point.

It is also recognised that engagement with employers has been limited. This has been associated with the slow progress in the area of vocational qualifications and work based learning.

Limited knowledge and understanding of SCQF among key groups

Respondents generally agreed that knowledge and understanding of SCQF among the general public is limited. A number of respondents also suggested that this in itself is not a major problem since SCQF will be of most interest to learners or practitioners for whom it will be useful. However, it is highlighted that knowledge among learners is limited, and patchy amongst practitioners.

Patchy engagement among stakeholders

It has been noted that stakeholder involvement is inconsistent. It has been most fully developed in the HEI and college sectors. Within the HEI sector an implementation strategy has been developed, although the level of engagement varies considerably between universities. In the college sector, the inclusion of colleges as DPs is considered an important step forward although the involvement at college level remains patchy. In other sectors, such as schools and employers, the opportunities for engagement have been limited because of the relatively minor involvement of SCQF in these areas.

Limited evidence of transfer of credit

A number of respondents suggested that despite the establishment of the formal structures and guidelines there was limited evidence of increased transfer with credit. Examples include the limited progress on work based learning, the need to implement the RPL guidelines and the evidence that articulation arrangements between colleges and HEIs are still patchy. In particular, it would appear that opportunities for students to transfer with credit from HNC/D courses in FE colleges to universities are more likely to occur in the 'new' universities than in the traditional elite 'ancient' universities (Gallacher, 2006).

Limitations of the partnership model

The partnership model of SCQF is widely recognised as an important contribution to the successful development of the Framework. It enabled the establishment of a very inclusive framework, which is unusual in an international context. However, a number of respondents indicated that this model was now making it very difficult to progress in a purposeful and efficient manner. Respondents reported a lack of consensus on key issues, slow progress on a range of issues because of the need to progress at the pace of the slowest partner and of 'going round in circles' in some cases. Clearly, this is leading to a sense of frustration and a feeling that momentum and direction are being lost.

The challenges for the future

Emerging from the issues discussed above it would appear that a number of key challenges now face SCQF and its partner organisations if it is to move forward successfully to its next phase of development.

Establishing an appropriate structure

Wide recognition has been given to the importance of the partnership model in establishing the consensus on which SCQF is based. Clearly, the concept of partnership is still vitally important for success to be achieved in this difficult area of work, but it must be a form of partnership that enables effective progress to be made. As already mentioned, the existing partnership arrangement needs to be reviewed and amended. Proposals are on the table to establish a new company limited by guarantee that will be responsible for the management of the SCQF programme of work. A board to which the officers would be answerable made up of senior staff from the DPs and with an independent chair, would approve a work programme for SCQF. Associated with this is the proposal to establish a Quality Committee that would make recommendations regarding the maintenance and extension of the Framework.

Involving the wider lifelong learning community

I have referred to the patchy involvement among the stakeholder community. Clearly if the opportunities created by the Framework to create greater flexibility for learners are to be utilised, active engagement with key stakeholder groups will be vital. This is

not primarily an issue for SCQF, but for the wider lifelong learning community. Only if the various stakeholder groups become fully involved will change take place. For this reason and a new SCQF company the suggestion is that a new and appropriate structure needs to be established with a clearer remit to take forward a programme of work in this area. It is suggested that the Scottish Executive could lead this as an aspect of their lifelong learning policy and strategy. This will again raise issues of autonomy within the sectors, but it appears to be another key area where an appropriate strategy is now required.

Establish a set of key realistic objectives for the next phase of development and implementation

From the evaluation of the progress to date, it now seems important to establish a set of key objectives for the next development and implementation phase. The suggestion is that these objectives should be ambitious if the opportunities created by SCQF are to be realised, but that they should also be realistic and achievable within a specified timescale. Key issues that have emerged for SCQF can be summarised as follows.

- Develop the programme of work on SVQs and other vocational qualification and more generally in the field of work based learning. This will provide enhanced opportunities for learners and be a means of involving employers and organisations such as Scottish Enterprise and the Skills for Business Network with the Framework.

- Examine ways of working more closely with professional and statutory bodies so that their qualifications can be included within the Framework. In taking this forward, clearly work undertaken with the Institute of Bankers, in the social services area and others can be built upon.

- Develop the work begun in the field of community learning and development (CLD). Major issues are associated with developing appropriate approaches to assessment and quality assurance in this field that will have significant resource implications for many of the groups involved.

- Recognise the continuing importance of developments at a UK and European level for SCQF. Progress in England is relatively slow, but now that the Framework for Achievement is being developed, this will create significant issues at a UK level. I have mentioned Scotland's leading role in Europe . It is important that SCQF continues to be actively involved in the Bologna Process, the Copenhagen process, and the development of the EQF.

- Develop an effective communications strategy for SCQF the need for which emerged from the evaluation. While there has been an extensive programme of work, the impact on key groups, including learners has been limited. This kind

of strategy needs to be developed in co-operation with key stakeholders through whom the SCQF's impact on learners will be achieved.

Conclusions on the contribution of SCQF to creating more accessible and flexible opportunities for lifelong learning

It can be seen from the outcomes of the evaluations carried out that SCQF has made considerable progress in creating a comprehensive framework that can link together a wide range of learning. However, we also concluded that 'there is only limited evidence of change which can be attributed to the specific contribution of SCQF' (Gallacher *et al.*, 2005:2). Moreover, it also appears that if the opportunities that the Framework presents to create a more accessible and flexible system of lifelong learning are to be grasped and fully exploited this will require the active engagement of the various stakeholder groups involved. This will include colleges, universities, schools, employers, professional bodies and others. SCQF itself cannot bring about this change. This is why I have suggested that it is best thought of as an instrument of change rather than an agent of change. Unrealistic expectations that a framework such as SCQF can itself bring about change can lead to frustration and disillusionment. In Scotland, we are trying to move on to a new stage of development and grasp these opportunities. It is now appropriate to consider whether this raises relevant questions for the NQF and SAQA.

Some questions for the NQF and SAQA arising from the Scottish experience

The NQF was established in South Africa with very ambitious objectives. The NQF brochure describes it as 'a means of transforming education and training in South Africa'. The objectives as outlined in the SAQA Act are:

- To create an integrated national framework for learning achievements;
- Facilitate access to, and mobility and progression within education, training and career paths;
- Enhance the quality of education and training;
- Accelerate the redress of past unfair discrimination in education, training and employment opportunities; and thereby
- Contribute to the full personal development of each learner and the social and economic development of the nation at large.

The context, as French suggests in his paper that summarised last year's Colloquium, was 'to redress the effects of a hated order' (French, 2005:54). This placed an enormous burden of expectation on the NQF and SAQA and emphasised the very

unfavourable circumstances in which the NQF was being established when compared with many other NQFs. In spite of these difficulties, there is considerable evidence of successes as the NQF Impact Study has shown (SAQA, 2005). However, there are also questions about the nature and extent of the changes that the NQF and SAQA have achieved, the priorities for the future and how these might be achieved. At last year's colloquium, many of these issues were summarised in the papers and discussions that were gathered together in *SAQA Bulletin* Vol. 8, No 1. This then raises the following questions that need to be considered.

- The first question: Is there a case for revisiting the specified objectives? In 1995, it was understandable why they were expressed in very ambitious terms. However, taking in to account the history of the NQF in South Africa since then, and the experience in countries such as Scotland where the context might be more favourable to change one can ask – is the burden of expectation for the NQF not too great? Is there not a danger that this burden will make it less likely that the desired changes will be introduced? An acknowledgement of this might not require a change to the specified objectives, which would be difficult (given the legislative framework in which they are embedded) but it might lead to a reconsideration of how priorities and key targets can be specified.

- Associated with this is the second question: who are the key target groups? French raised this question in his paper last year. He referred to the three groups identified as intended beneficiaries when the NQF was launched – employed workers who were frustrated in their career paths; the unemployed or informally employed; young people who experience an impoverished 'academic' education. He suggests that these groups are largely ignored in recent discussions (French, 2005). This in turn raises the related question of the differing agendas that tend to be embedded in lifelong learning policies. Simply stated these can be seen as social justice or social equity on the one hand and economic development on the other. These do not need to be contradictory; nevertheless pursuing the economic development agenda can result in less emphasis on the issues of social justice or equity. Therefore the question those responsible for the NQF need to consider is: whom do they want to focus on as their priority groups?

- A further question that must be addressed is how can change be most effectively introduced? I have suggested that NQFs are best understood as instruments of change rather than agents of change. This directs our attention to the ways in which the various stakeholder groups can be encouraged to engage with the NQF, and take advantage of the opportunities that it creates. In Scotland, as indicated, despite official support for the SCQF among the main stakeholders, the knowledge, understanding and use of SCQF of the staff working in the organisations involved is still patchy. The extent of engagement of organisations and their staff often depends on what they see as positive advantages for them.

As already indicated, in Scotland the 'post 92' universities are much more likely to establish links with the FE colleges and provide opportunities for students to progress from HNC/Ds with credit than are the 'ancient' universities. This in part reflects the fact that the former FE college students are a much more important source of potential students for the 'post 92' universities whereas the 'ancient' universities receive large number of applicants from well-qualified school leavers. Similarly, at present there is little engagement with employers because they can see few advantages for them. An important question which must be faced in Scotland (and probably also in South Africa) is how to encourage engagement from these key stakeholder groups. However this will require wider policy initiatives as suggested in Raffe's idea of 'policy breadth' (Raffe, 2005). Those involved with NQFs must consider how they can encourage and support the appropriate policies and strategies.

- My next question is about the structures that are in place to support the work with the numerous education and training bodies and organisations. In South Africa, it appears that SAQA has established a complex set of structures for this purpose. It is crucially important that the appropriateness and effectiveness of these structures should be reviewed to ensure that the NQF achieves its objectives. In Scotland, there has been growing recognition of an urgent need for structural change if SCQF is to move on and achieve its objectives. This involves establishing a new structure for SCQF to ensure that the Development Partners work together more effectively. It is hoped that a new structure will be created that will involve the wider education and training community. Putting in place this structure could be crucial to the long-term success of SCQF.

- A further question about relationships with the wider education and training community deals with the nature of the change that is being introduced. In South Africa, the NQF sought to introduce change of a 'revolutionary' nature. The context of this was the history and legacy of apartheid. The NQF was established to 'transform' education and training. However, the literature on NQFs shows that they are often most successful when they adopt a more evolutionary approach (OECD 2004; Young 2005). In Scotland, the approach is based on partnership and consensus. This has helped to ensure that all of the main sectoral organisations involved have accepted the SCQF. I have mentioned this approach has now reached a stage where it is slowing developments and a further evolutionary stage is required. Much has been made of the importance of communities of trust in the successful development of NQFs. In South Africa there is now a history of change of around 10 years since the NQF was established. These changes have affected schools, colleges and work based learning as well as the NQF itself. As an outsider, I cannot comment with certainty about the impact of this change, but I would like to pose the question: would reflection on this process of change create opportunities to develop a more evolutionary approach in which the development of consensus and communities of trust might have a more central place?

- When considering the impact of change it may also be worthwhile to put this in a wider international context, particularly when considering change in higher education and work based learning. The development of mass higher education is resulting in increasing diversity and differentiation in higher education systems throughout the world. In Scotland, responses to the opportunities created by SCQF are not uniform across the university sector. There is also evidence that the boundaries between further education and higher education are being increasingly blurred in a number of countries (Young, 2006). In some cases this has been associated with the development of short cycle work related higher education. These are usually two-year courses with a strong vocational and work related element (Gallacher and Osborne, 2005). An interesting example of this is the development of foundation degrees in England. This is a recent government initiative in response to a growing concern about a perceived skills deficit. This exists at the intermediate (associate professional and technical) level in national policy. These two year degrees are validated by universities usually developed in co-operation with FE colleges and often delivered in the colleges. Employer engagement and work based learning are key elements that are expected to be embedded in these programmes (Beaney, 2006; QAA, 2004). Developments of this kind are ways in which the traditional distinctions between academic and vocational knowledge and learning are being eroded. I am unable to comment on the extent to which there are opportunities for similar types of developments in South Africa, but would suggest that it is important to look at the wider developments in education and training and the role of the wider stakeholder groups if the opportunities associated with the NQF are to be fully realised.

Conclusion

The central argument of this short paper is, I hope, clear. It is best to see NQFs as instruments of change, rather than being themselves agents of change. If the expectation of their capacity to engineer change is over-emphasised, disappointments and frustrations will be inevitable. In the processes of using NQFs as instruments of change, the links and relationships with the wider community of organisations responsible for education and training are of crucial importance. Building relationships of understanding and trust and seeking means of engaging institutions and organisations in ways that they perceive to be in accord with their own agendas, while at the same time introducing change are important parts of this process. I hope that by making some comparisons with the challenges currently facing us in Scotland as the SCQF is used as an instrument of change, that I have raised some interesting questions which can be considered in the South African context.

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RESPONSE TO DR JIM GALLACHER'S PAPER, 'NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS: INSTRUMENTS OF CHANGE OR AGENTS OF CHANGE?'

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National qualifications frameworks (NQFs) are universal. Every country has one, even though they might not have formalised it by calling it a national qualifications framework. Every country has a collection of laws, policies and practices regarding their education and training qualifications and learning systems. In the absence of a formally declared national qualifications framework, this collection of laws, policies and practices regarding a country's education and training qualifications and learning systems conceptually constitutes one for it. The question then arises: 'If this situation works, why formally constitute national qualifications frameworks?'

All national qualifications frameworks have arisen to address specific issues such as access, progression, mobility, articulation, integration, quality, development and redress. All of them are attempting to address specific issues and resolve specific problems, and hence they all have change agendas. However, the question of whether they are instruments of change or agents of change raises an interesting choice of metaphor that I will not address here. Recognising the limitations of metaphors, however, I would argue that NQFs could be either or both. I base my reasoning on the following:

1. NQFs arise out of their historical trajectory and therefore are formalised in ways acceptable to a specific context and country. They therefore are shaped either as an instrument or an agent or both.

2. When a formalised NQF establishes a distinctive discourse with specific practices, it begins to have agency and therefore cannot be viewed as just an instrument. Keevy (2006:54) gives the following interpretation of power in the NQF discourse:
   Power exists in the NQF discourse in that different NQF stakeholders continually and consistently exercise power – this power represses the voices of some stakeholders in order to make others more dominant.

This mediation of power is a manifestation of the NQF's agency.

3. Fullan (1999: 82) argues that for change to be successful we require moral purpose, good ideas and power:
   The interactive systems I described…the deep meaning of collaboration to obtain substantial results – are precisely systems that gain their tremendous energy through the fusion of intellectual, political and spiritual purpose.

If transformation policy is envisaged like this, NQFs cannot be just instruments. The second question that arises is 'Why do formalised NQFs not achieve as ambitiously as intended?' The simple answer is that they have to overcome the same obstacles and mediate the same vested interests faced by their predecessors – non-formalised NQFs. However, as Fullan (1999) points out, change happens when the 'deep meaning of collaboration' is achieved. We therefore must evaluate NQFs in terms of how they are established for achieving systems that exhibit this 'deep meaning of collaboration to obtain substantial results' and whether they 'are precisely systems that gain their tremendous energy through the fusion of intellectual, political and spiritual purpose'.

A country's NQF in design, development and implementation is, in fact, a barometer of the status of the various interactive systems that make up education and training infrastructure and learning systems of that country. It maps the relationships, the power and the vested interests of those systems as well as the policy intentions. It maps the social geography of the education and training qualifications and learning systems field. This mapping with its overt, hidden and opaque aspects gives rise to considerations about what the mapping should describe and once described what strategies, tactics and advances can be used in the engagement between the stakeholders defined and affected by the specific NQF.

Dr Gallacher's paper provides a very useful reflection on the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework and the South African National Qualifications Framework. The different historical trajectories and social geographies are clear as well as the similarities, in terms of social justice, economic development, lifelong learning and other local and global phenomena. He poses the following six questions for our consideration in reflecting on the NQF:

1. Revisiting the objectives

During the NQF review process (that started officially in 2001, although pressure for it began in 1999 and which today in 2006 is still unresolved), the one area that no stakeholder grouping objected to and which was, in fact, unanimously supported was the NQF objectives (DoE/DoL, 2002; DoE/DoL, 2003). Initially, it was in the area of the structures both in standards setting and later in quality assurance that there were criticisms and alternate proposals. The fact that these have not been resolved by Government to date is indicative of the difficulty in mediating the relationships between various stakeholders and government agencies. These bodies find it increasingly difficult to demarcate their legitimate interests in an environment that is increasingly joining up, globalising and crosscutting in significant ways. In our context the issue of integration of education and training has become a very vexing one and yet all indications are that the 'traditional distinctions between academic and vocational knowledge and learning are being eroded' (Gallacher, 2007). The 'erosion' or the 'integration' is not the underlying problem, rather it is who is in charge and how do they manage. Moreover, this raises the question about structures.

The South African NQF has the advantage of a set of agreed upon objectives that can form the basis of a shared vision and mission. The objectives can form the basis of a shared set of values that inform our choices about structures and help to achieve the vision.

2. Differing agendas embedded in lifelong learning policies. Who are the priority target groups?

The South African Government has set as national priorities the alleviation of poverty and unemployment. Numerous education and training initiatives (e.g. the National Skills Development Strategy, the National Human Resource Development Strategy and Tirisano) are underpinned and supported by the NQF. However, the NQF must have fully operational systems to target priority groups effectively. Often, setting up the operational system is seen as not being focused.

The targeting of priority groups is evident in the standards and qualifications for Adult Basic Education and Training, Early Childhood Development Practitioners, Community Development Workers, Health Caregivers, and expanded public works programmes. At the same time, the issues of quality in education and training and better assessment practices including the recognition of prior learning have been firmly highlighted in South African society.

3. How can change most effectively be introduced? Viewing NQFs as either instruments or agents of change

The introduction of change requires careful strategies, tactics and nuanced advances with stakeholders to negotiate the social geography mapped out by NQFs. Since our NQF has been shaped as an agent of change by its historical trajectory it has had to face the contestations that are inherent in our environment. I am not convinced that had we conceived our NQF as an instrument of change that we would have prevented this. The SCQF examples of how they now need to consider new structures, have more ambitious objectives (yet realistic and achievable in a specified timescale) and need to develop a programme of work on SVQs and other vocational qualifications, especially in the field of work based learning, are indicative of the issues that have to be addressed by NQFs. With our NQF, we confronted these issues at inception and much work has been done. Which way would have been best? I am convinced that historical trajectories determine what is possible and we have to make our choices. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words ring true: 'What is success, what is failure? Time alone distinguishes'.

4. Consideration of structures that are in place to support this work with the wider range of education and training bodies and organisations

The challenge is always to find the appropriate structures that can enable effective progress. An old organisational development adage is 'form follows function', but this has to be tempered by what is possible in a specific environment. Just as the SCQF is considering proposals around new structures, the NQF review process has proposed new structures for our NQF. The proposed structure changes for the SCQF are significant in that a new body (possibly like a SAQA) is being envisaged. I would similarly argue that function, historical trajectory and the current environment would determine the kind of structures that are best suited to take NQFs forward.

5. Relationships with the wider education and training community hinges on the nature of the change that is being introduced

I agree with Dr Gallacher (2006) that 'reflection on this process of change might create opportunities to develop a more evolutionary approach in which the development of consensus and communities of trust might have a more central place'. Central to the development and implementation of South Africa's NQF are three important overarching considerations: democratic participation, intellectual scrutiny and adequate resources. While there were always considerable opportunities for the development of consensus, the issues of communities of trust were not adequately addressed. In fact, in 1995 many observers remarked that the NQF would not materialise and therefore did not have to be taken seriously. As our NQF took shape and started to affect the education and training system, significant areas of contestation started to emerge.

This resulted directly in the NQF review process that is still unresolved. Careful attention must be given to building these communities of trust among stakeholders as well as building the shared values and purposes for advancing our NQF. This may be the critical and sufficient condition necessary for a successful NQF.

6. Wider international context: Traditional distinctions between academic and vocational knowledge and learning are being eroded

The wider international context is providing ideas and innovations and new challenges. The erosion of traditional distinctions between academic and vocational knowledge and learning create new challenges and new opportunities. The development of NQFs around the world, particularly the development of the European Qualifications Framework, means that our NQF cannot just be written off as a failed policy – as one South African researcher would have us believe. Rather in South Africa, we must regard our NQF as a national work in progress to resolve the vexing education and training issues of a national integrated framework for learning achievements, access, quality, redress and development. As we take intellectual scrutiny seriously, we continue to make 'our NQF road by walking reflectively, accountably and boldly' (Isaacs, 2001). To this end, the wider international context provides a very important sounding board.

Conclusion

NQFs can be understood as instruments of change or agents of change. However, South Africa's NQF can best be understood as having agency through the discourse and practices it has established. It is the NQF as discourse and discoursal practice that holds the greater opportunities for creating the interactive systems that make 'the deep meaning of collaboration to obtain substantial results' possible, because 'they gain their tremendous energy through the fusion of intellectual, political and spiritual purpose' (Fullan, 1999: 82).

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THE NQF AS A SOCIALLY INCLUSIVE AND COHESIVE SYSTEM: COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE AND TRUST

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> There is a great need to infuse the NQF with trust and mutual respect. We place emphasis on the importance of communities of trust in which providers and users of qualifications develop a common understanding. We consider that qualifications and standards on their own are but instruments to facilitate learning, and that curriculum and pedagogy and assessment form the cornerstones of the national learning system and must be given their due. (DoE/DoL, 2002:xi).

Introduction

A central analogy running through this paper configures constructing an NQF as comparable to building a democratic South Africa within a context characterised by inequalities and fractures that have their roots in both our apartheid past and our globalising present. The intertwining of democracy and education has its roots in the Enlightenment project where reason emerged as our primary instrument for social and personal development. To learn is to become a member of a community and constructing a nation requires an educational programme (however 'hidden' this curriculum may be) and central to both projects, in spite of the vast differences in scale, is an orientation towards reason and democracy.

Education and democracy are both dependent on the evolution of communities characterised by stable patterns of particular practices. Schools are 'rule-governed' (and when not rule-governed become dysfunctional and non-educational) through explicit social orders and personal disciplines that create a strong sense of good and bad or right and wrong. Progressive societies, characterised by their commitment to improving wellbeing, are regulated by systems that strive to strengthen social cohesion and improve material and social conditions. Inevitably, characterising education and democracy as desirable 'public goods' towards which societies and individuals ought to strive is to indicate the value-laden nature of these projects.

Discourses about social order and personal discipline are invariably value-laden in their attempts to grasp the affective and moral underpinnings that inform our explanations of social and personal development. Within education, values find their clearest expression in our conceptions of quality. High quality education is good education that does all the right things. The challenge comes in recognising and realising what is 'good', 'right' and 'high quality'.

In a democracy, the challenge to the societal role of values is how to implement them by moving from universal values to particular practices. Similarly, the challenge with the NQF is how to implement its role by moving from general to specialised standards. How does one translate theory into practice, standards into programmes (curriculum, pedagogy and assessment) and constitutional values into ethical practices?

Communities of practice are examined against this background as democratic and educational 'relaying' agencies that interpret universal values and standards and translate or recontextualise them into specialised practices. We explore briefly the complexity and multiplicity of communities and the challenges facing any attempt to 'create' or develop communities of practice. The importance of language and communication, of purposive and deliberative reasoning and of decision-making legitimatised by sufficient agreement, are posited as the necessary prerequisites for the successful functioning of communities of practice as builders of a socially inclusive and cohesive NQF.

Social inclusion, cohesion and trust

The building of a socially cohesive NQF grounded on 'trustful' communities of practice is a similar process to building a South African nation with a collective identity – a South African community. Indeed, part of the *raison d' être* of the NQF, expressed most clearly in the critical outcomes, is a vision of the ideal 'learned' South African with a strong commitment to the values of South Africa's Constitution. Whereas the development of many other NQFs, especially those in the developed world, has been accretive, administrative and technical in an attempt to 'co-ordinate' what already exists, South Africa's NQF has a strongly normative orientation; what is (apartheid education) must be transformed into what ought to be (democratic education) (Harley and Parker, 2006). The moral imperatives guiding this journey into the future come from our constitutional values. However, these values provide only abstract concepts that still have to be interpreted and put into practice – a process that can lead to differences, disagreements, contradictions and conflict. To counter the fragmentation that may emerge from these disagreements, the Constitution provides for a constitutional court with supreme sovereignty to resolve conflicts between differing interpretations in accordance with an orientation provided by the values of our Constitution.

The uncertainties of translating abstract and generic juridical concepts into concrete and specific legal practices is similar to the process of translating generic educational standards into specific educational practices – the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment through which learning is structured into 'worthwhile' programmes. Constitutional values provide generic or universal benchmarks of a civilised society – human dignity, equality and freedom – to indicate the objectives that ought to guide the development of South African society. However, they still need to be interpreted or translated into particular practices by the citizens and communities

inhabiting South Africa. In an ideal cohesive and trustful society where there is strong agreement, the movement from universal to particular should be smooth and seamless. The universalising agreement, marked by our consent to the sovereignty of the Constitution, provides an overall framework of agreement within which contests between different interpretations or translations can be mediated peacefully.

One measure of our distance from realising our social objectives is the amount of violence in our society, where violence indicates a breakdown in the universalising agreement – a breakdown that breeds distrust and conflict. As proposed above about society, we reiterate the concept that in an ideal cohesive and trustful community of educators where there is strong agreement between communities of practice on the standards, criteria and practices that constitute high quality education and training, the movement from generic universalising standards to particular pedagogic practices should be smooth and seamless. Different communities (for example academic and occupational educators) will agree on interpretations of generic standards and the translation of them into specialised practices. In the real world, however, dissonance, tension and conflict tend to mark the communication processes making agreement hard to reach. This similarity between 'implementing' constitutional values and educational standards resonates with the strong interconnections between education and society. It would be naïve to believe that one can construct an inclusive NQF in a society fractured by exclusions, or (to recall the language of the liberation struggle) to have normal education in an abnormal society. Education and training and by implication the construction of an NQF are part and parcel of making a democratic South Africa and face challenges similar to those prevalent in the broader society.

The recent discussion document on macro-social trends in South Africa: *A Nation in the Making* released by the Policy Co-ordination and Advisory Services of the Presidency (PCAS, 2000) identifies specific challenges to social cohesion that are symptomatic of a weak national consciousness/value orientation:

- South Africa is a highly diverse society with multiple identities.
- While race, ethnic and language identities are receding, class identity is rising.
- Although a majority of young people identify themselves as African or South African, this is primarily in respect to a geographic and state identity.
- Tensions exist between a western-oriented cosmopolitanism and African oriented local identities and cultures.
- There is a weak entrepreneurial culture.

In addition to these specific challenges, the report identifies the major challenge militating against strengthening social cohesion. This is the tension between differing value systems. On the one hand, a market-based economy with competitive, self-interested and individualistic identities desiring wealth and conspicuous consumption and on the other, a caring, compassionate, fair and equitable society with public-interested identities oriented towards 'collective goods' such as justice, fairness, honesty, human solidarity and respect for the dignity of the 'other'.

This tension between a competitive market-based economy and a cooperative caring society resonates with a tension between ethical approaches to public policy and the governance of society. On the one hand there is a 'needs-based' approach that prioritises the public interest and is broadly utilitarian (the state ought to do what will bring the greatest wellbeing to the greatest number of people). On the other hand there is a 'rights-based' approach that prioritises private interests and is broadly deontological (the state ought to do what will best protect the 'sanctity' and rights of the individual). The utilitarian approach views institutions, organisations, people and their actions from a social perspective: what is in the best interests of the majority of society? The deontological perspective is that of the individual: what is in the best interest of an individual?

Public policy has to chart a course that achieves a balance between these approaches with the constitutional court acting as the final arbiter of what constitutes a 'just balance' between the rights of the individual and the interest of the collective. The state and associated collective governance structures must protect both individual freedoms and nurture the vulnerable and innocent; encourage individual self-advancement and promote collective social development; respect individual excellence and practice social equity; encourage bonds of solidarity and cultivate individual creativity.

Building a 'national' identity goes beyond the formal requirements of the law and requires an ethical commitment to a common identity and common interests as South Africans, to a sense of *belonging with* each other. The values underpinning our Constitution have to be progressively realised through an ethical development project that transforms relations between people from a '*fearing*' of the other towards '*trusting*' – even if this is conditional. This ethical project aims at shifting the balance between starkly dichotomous outcomes, from a 'negative' to a 'positive' pole: fear and suspicion *contra* trust; a tendency to be violent and harm others *contra* respecting and caring for the wellbeing of others; an egoism prioritising only self-interest *contra* an altruism supporting a healthy society.

It is only within a context of massive social transformation strengthening social cohesion that the NQF can realise its own contribution to social cohesion. However, there is a large gap between espousing values such as honesty and our daily practices.

Closing this gap and learning to be ethical, is an educational process grounded in induction into a community of practice. Our moral development is similar to and linked with our cognitive development. Not only are both processes fundamentally social they are grounded in our ability to communicate with others.

History teaches us that most successful societies have high degrees of social cohesion and that many societies with strong social cohesion are highly homogenous and, conversely, increasing diversity often leads to a weakening of social cohesion. How cohesion is achieved varies enormously from country to country reflecting a broad range of factors including history, geography, religion, politics and economics.

Developing South Africa's social cohesion is impeded by the inequalities that scar our society. Many of our citizens live in poverty and daily experience its 'evils'. The following conditions are indications that for many the values enshrined in our Constitution are not present in their lives:

- Continuing income inequalities
- High rates of unemployment
- High mortality rates
- High violent crime rates (especially, violence towards women and children)
- Low achievements in education and health indicators
- Rapid urban migration
- The fracturing of households (evidenced in the increase in the number of households and their changing demographics).

These conditions make creating a socially inclusive and cohesive NQF and trustful communities of practice a difficult endeavour. Given that the NQF contains diverse communities of practice and that tensions between different identities, interests and orientations abound, how can trust be built?

Increasing calls for standards and quality assurance are an indication of a mistrustful society. Our faith and trust in the 'goodwill' of others has been eroded and there is an increasing demand for transparent and accountable practices, for binding contracts and performance indicators. These demands for standards setting and quality assurance structures and processes that are accountable are part of a broader deepening of democracy. Increasingly, the importance of democracy lies in those organisational practices that promote transparency, accountability, justice and human rights – the very ingredients that are needed to strengthen social cohesion and increase levels of trust.

Building a democratic South Africa characterised by constitutional values and building a socially cohesive and inclusive NQF depend in similar ways on creating communities where good values and best standards are embodied in everyday practices. How do we best construct communities of practice within the NQF system with the potential for achieving the objectives of the NQF?

Communities of practice

The notion of 'communities of practice' has become influential within debates in education over the last fifteen years. Lave and Wenger (1991), amongst the foremost exponents of the concept, offer the following definition:

> A community of practice is a set of relations among persons, activity and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice. A community of practice is an intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge (Lave and Wenger, 1991:98).

Communities of practice are primarily a means of categorising a particular set, or web, of relations between people as having a particular identity, value orientation and purpose. Within a strong community of practice there is a strong sense of shared values and beliefs; a consciousness of, and commitment to, an overall holistic purpose that shapes the activities of the community; and agreement on the set of practices that constitute 'competent practice'. At some level, learning is always induction into a community whose boundaries are marked by commitment to a set of beliefs about what counts as knowledge and skills and what are 'good' values and attitudes to underpin and infuse learning as a process of enlightenment, enhancement and attunement.

The existence of educational communities of practice is a necessary condition for learning to take place:

> As an aspect of social practice, learning involves the whole person; it implies not only a relation to specific activities, but also a relation to social communities – it implies becoming a full participant, a member, a kind of person...(this) implies becoming a different person with respect to the possibilities enabled by these systems of relations (Lave and Wenger, 1991:53).

This definition once again highlights the similarities between building a democratic society and an educational community – being a member of a community is necessary for becoming learned and for becoming a citizen in a democratic society. Another key aspect of this definition is a holistic perspective: learning involves the whole person and by implication, learning always has an overarching holistic purpose.

A South African example

McLaughlin (2003:348) notes that one of the important contributions made by the concept of 'communities of practice' is related to difficulties in articulating educational goods in fully transparent ways, especially when what is at stake is not the articulation of abstract ideals but of forms of action in particular circumstances.

> The need for 'communities of practice' is seen, for example, in relation to the exercise of forms of pedagogic phronesis in relation to complex pedagogic challenges where abstract principles and guidelines require interpretation and implementation in practical contexts (McLaughlin, 2003:348).

South Africa provides an interesting and recent example of an attempt by a state to construct a pedagogic phronesis through national regulations that depended for success on a strong community of practice. In 2000, the Department of Education (DoE) produced a new set of *Norms and Standards for Educators (NSE)* using an outcomes based approach. The NSE does not provide a curriculum for teacher education. Rather, it represents, in a broad and generic manner, the requirements of the DoE as an employer of the evidence of the learning outcomes achieved in a qualification. That is, the knowledge, skills and values or applied competence (where applied competence is understood to mean the ability to put into practice in the relevant context the learning outcomes acquired in obtaining a qualification) that a person must have to be recognised as an educator (SAQA, 1998:3).

In addition, a hierarchical framework of levels of achievement corresponding to the levels of the NQF is provided enabling the employer, after negotiation with the unions in the Education Labour Relations Council, to determine ranks and grades and their remuneration values. The *Norms and Standards for Educators (NSE)* are heavily influenced by labour law requirements such as the construction of an occupational structure with clearly defined career paths and the ability to identify 'incompetent' or 'incapable' teachers, or teachers guilty of 'misconduct'.

The NSE criteria are 'formal' rather than substantive standards and provide little specification of the selection, pacing, sequencing, progression and evaluation criteria that will characterise the curriculum and there is no indication of appropriate depths of content knowledge and levels of cognitive demand. While this allows for a significant degree of institutional autonomy over the curriculum, it presupposes that teacher educators and teachers can read the criteria in a way that is meaningful and 'aligned with' the meaning intended by the state in promulgating the criteria.

In their critique of the *Norms and Standards for Educators*, Shalem and Slonimsky assert:

> ...the point is that any of the 120 specifications displayed for the three kinds of competence (practical, foundational and reflexive) only make sense from within the moral and political values and the pedagogical preferences embedded in the educational perspective held by the competent educator (Shalem and Slonimsky, 1999:14).

The criteria are only useful as descriptions of competence for an educator who already understands and practices the competence. The NSE are not themselves an educational 'tool' that teach a person how to be a competent educator. Furthermore, they only enable a person to recognise a competent educator if that person already knows what it means to be a competent educator. A trainee teacher will only achieve competence with its ethical, epistemological and ontological commitments through initiation and inculcation into a community of practice that is already demonstrating

and displaying the knowledge, skills and values described by the criteria. According to Shalem and Slonimsky:

> 'I cannot be told criteria. I am in criteria in much the same way that I belong to a community' (*ibid.,*14).

The intention of the NSE is that teacher educators will be able to judge the value of a student's performance using the criteria (*ibid.,*11). But as long as the teacher educator does not know what kind of object 'good teaching' is, his/her judgements based on the criteria are not in fact applications of the criteria (*ibid.,*12). Another way of expressing this conundrum is to say that we can only recognise the meaning of the criteria when we can already realise the knowledge, skills and values indicated by the criteria.

In addition to overcoming this cognitive conundrum, (teacher) education can only take place where there is a strong affective relationship between educator and learner. Following Winch, Shalem and Slonimsky argue that there is a mutual obligation to seek attunement between learners, teachers and governments but the *Norms and Standards* do not capture this obligation (Shalem and Slonimsky, 1999:22). Obligation is not about obeying someone who has the authority to tell you what to do. Rather, it is a relationship where no one feels independent and free from the voice of the other (*ibid.,*26). In the cognitive realm, to understand the NSE we have to recognise the meaning of the concepts and criteria. Moreover, in the affective realm, we have to recognise the humanness of the other – their sentience and consciousness.

This dual recognition highlights the need to foreground and extend trainee teachers' own conceptions of the end and goods of teaching in order to develop their powers of excellence. For Shalem and Slonimsky, the NSE confuses the pedagogical and regulatory intents and capabilities of the state to the detriment of both aims. The NSE criteria cannot give access to the goods of the practice and as a result may not be much use for regulation.

The critique of Shalem and Slonimsky reminds us that pedagogy is grounded in interpersonal relations and 'good' pedagogy requires moral and affective orientations that infuse 'instructional interactions' at the teaching-learning interface. This moral 'purpose' and its associated affective desires cannot be captured by a set of generic criteria. Bernstein reminds us that pedagogic discourse is both a discourse of skills of various kinds (and their relations to each other) and a discourse of social order (Bernstein, 1996:46). Bernstein distinguishes 'instructional' discourses of skills, specialised competences and consciousness from 'regulative' discourses of order, relation, identity and conscience. The regulative discourses of social order refer to the form that hierarchical relations take in the pedagogic relation and to expectations about conduct, character and manner. These expectations find expression, where the framing is strong, in character labels such as conscientious, attentive, industrious,

careful and receptive (Bernstein, 1996:27). Education for values and education for competence/performance are integrated in pedagogic discourse although this integration is not on an equal footing as:

> Fundamental to my argument is that regulative discourse is the dominant discourse. In one sense this is obvious because it is the moral discourse that creates the criteria, which give rise to character, manner, conduct, posture, etc. In School, it tells the children what to do, where they can go, and so on. It is quite clear that regulative discourse creates the rules of social order... and produces *the order in the instructional discourse* (Bernstein, 1996:48. Emphasis in original).

For Bernstein, pedagogic discourse is constructed by a recontextualising principle, which selectively appropriates, relocates, refocuses and relates other discourses to constitute its own order (Bernstein, 1996:47). This recontextualisation de-locates discourses from their substantive practice and context and relocates them in a virtual or arbitrary space according to principles of selective reordering and refocusing that remove the discourses from the social basis of their practice (Bernstein, 1996:184). Another way of expressing this is to see it as a movement from the real to the ideal. In the process of recontextualisation a gap or space is created in which ideology can play – making the ideal a construction of dominant beliefs and practices rather than an abstract representation of the real (Bernstein, 1996:47).[1]

Reading Bernstein together with Shalem and Slonimsky, one can suggest that understanding the inside of a pedagogic practice, recognising its intrinsic worth and purpose, is inextricably interwoven with recognising what is outside of the practice – the social order within which the practice is embedded. Within any discourse, be it regulative, instructional, philosophical, or musical, meaning emerges from an 'embedded' perspective – speaking and listening with understanding are communal or collective practices – and these perspectives are always value-laden. If the pedagogic practice does not have these affective and moral attributes, it risks becoming an empty vessel: a matter of form rather than substance. Teaching and learning become ritualistic practices where 'going through the motions' is more important than cognitive and affective demand.

In mitigation of this moral absence that characterises the NSE, the Department of Education could point to the large scale and intensive consultation process undertaken in developing the *Norms and Standards for Educators*. Although this response indicates a commitment to democracy, inclusivity and transparency, it does not address the question of how generic criteria could be 'translated' into specific

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1 *See Mattson and Harley (2002) for an example of this phenomenon*

outcomes and assessment criteria that demonstrate attunement to the intrinsic values of the pedagogic practices. The lack of this moral sensibility became evident when the NSE were interpreted in very different ways by different communities of practice in accordance with their own ethical, epistemological and ontological commitments. It is not that these diverse communities were deliberately flouting the prescribed commitments of the DoE, rather they were filling a vacuum created by the lack of explicit value commitments with their own value commitments.

Looking back with hindsight, one can evaluate the NSE as partially successful. They provided a stable frame of reference and a reasonably efficient process of approving institutional programmes. However, their contribution has been undermined by their inability to change practices. As the identities of teacher education communities have become more visible through the Ministerial Committee on Teacher Education and the programme re-accreditation review of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), it is clear that the normative and transformative intent of the NSE has not been realised. Institutions were able to interpret the NSE criteria in ways that suited their already existing beliefs and practices and felt under no obligation (or regulation) to change. Given the above characteristics, it would not be unfair to describe teacher education in South Africa as made up of diverse and weak communities of practice and not one strong professional community of practice. Broadly, the lack of a strong hegemonic community of practice of teacher educators undermined the production and efficacy of the NSE.

If teacher education in South Africa is composed of weak communities of practice, then those professional bodies that exercise tight control over standards setting and quality assurance such as accountancy, medicine and engineering provide an example of strong communities of practice. Strong communities translate standards into curriculum, pedagogic and assessment practices with high levels of interpretive agreement. One reason for this is that these professions function as exclusive, self-referential epistemic communities. They are closed, self-regulating homogenous systems in which development of standard-setting, curricula, assessment and pedagogic practices does not require reference to an outside constituency – making agreement on the core competencies and identity of a particular profession simpler.
Professions such as accountancy, engineering and medicine have clear, precise, codified standards with strongly specified content (Harley and Parker, 2006). Over the last ten years, these professions have extended their standards into new domains that have a strong emphasis on ethics – on the values, attitudes and behaviours of members of the profession. These new domains demonstrate the increasing emphasis within professions on the importance of making regulative discourse explicit. Whereas in the past, tradition, hierarchy and authority were taken for granted and standards could focus primarily on describing instructional content, modern societies require that the internal moral order of the profession be made more transparent and accountable. This transparency of moral order also reflects a change in the

patterns of desire that characterise a profession. Although not a focus of this paper, the desires of members of a community are a part of what constitutes the identity and practices of the community. Doctors ought to believe in the values of the Hippocratic Oath, care for their patients and avoid harming them. Doctors should be persons of integrity and honesty. However, if greed flourishes, these commitments are likely to be undermined. On the other hand, if doctors act as though their primary obligation is to other members of their community of practice and not to the patients they serve, then accountability is likely to be weakened.

The exclusivity of professions expressed through strongly classified boundaries that limit access to membership of the profession also provide the assurance of competence: to qualify as a doctor or an engineer is to undergo an arduous and rigorous process of apprenticeship, initiation, disciplining and examination leading to attainment of a level of sufficient expertise to be permitted to practice. Professional communities of practice reify the exclusiveness of expertise and elitism. This may indicate a latent contradiction between exclusive and democratic communities of practice. Robert Dahl (1989, 1998) refers to effective participation, voting equality, enlightened understanding, control of the agenda and inclusion of adults as some of the key conditions to be met for a society or organisation to be democratic. If exclusive communities cannot fulfil these criteria, it implies they are undemocratic.

We can now formulate two major challenges facing the implementation of an NQF in South Africa:

1. In order to achieve commensurable interpretations of generic standards, and to translate these generic standards into particular practices within specific fields, there have to be communities of practice with sufficient internal consensus on core interpretations or translations to produce 'enhancing' or 'enlightening' modes of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. This requires a 'double-translation' from the 'generic' to the 'specific' and from the 'real' world of practice to the 'ideal' or virtual world of the classroom. Each translation creates a discursive gap where power, desire, ideology and rationality interplay either facilitating or impeding deliberative agreements on standard-setting and quality assurance and on curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. The most effective communities of practice are found in the professions with their self-sustaining patterns of power-relations, desires, ideology and rationality. These exclusive professional communities of practice with their strong identities and boundaries are able to participate actively in the broader NQF community and to adapt their pedagogic discourse to fit in with the NQF. There is, however, a risk that 'what is' persists and the profession avoids transformation into 'what ought to be'.

How can SAQA ensure that exclusive communities of practice are transforming their beliefs and practices in ways that are consonant with the values and objectives of the NQF?

2. It is much harder to identify inclusive communities of practice. Some inclusive communities of practice will have emerged from the Standards Generating Body (SGB) and National Standards Body (NSB) processes. Other examples will have emerged from economic sites where associations of people engaged in similar trades or practices construct a community, for example in cabinet-making, fabrication and other occupations such as hairdressing, cosmetology and homeopathy. Communities may emerge based on common interests within and between educational institutions, for example associations of sociologists and of historians. These inclusive communities with their weaker boundaries and identities will struggle to be self-sustaining insofar as they lack the characteristics that make exclusive communities self-sustaining: strong and stable power relations, ideologies and patterns of rationality and deliberation.

How can SAQA promote the creation and sustainable development of inclusive and effective communities of practice?

Communities of practice and the South African NQF

The strong emphases given by SAQA to stakeholder inclusivity and participation and to the transparency and accountability of its practices are indicators of SAQA's commitment to democratic values and practices. SAQA has reason to believe that these commitments and practices will lead to democratic communities of practices that will achieve consensus on how best to translate the generic standards into specific pedagogic practices.

Granville (2001) notes that the NQF, by focusing solely on statements of specific and critical exit level outcomes, encourages great flexibility and autonomy for sectoral interests in the development of unit standards and qualifications. The result is a very high number of unit standards and qualifications. The South African approach places a high premium on accurate language. Given the multiplicity of unit standards and qualifications, the discriminating element between all standards and qualifications is the language used to describe them. However, consistency and reliability of language usage cannot be assumed. On the contrary, given the diverse backgrounds of the stakeholder constituencies, experience suggests that disagreements will likely be the norm.

In the absence of homogenous exclusive communities where consistency and reliability of language usage can be assumed, how does one go about building a common language to mediate the movement from standard/qualification to curriculum to syllabus to learning programme? Any attempts to counter the diversity that comes with inclusivity by further specification of standards, especially in regard to content, is likely to lead to contestation as those with different interpretations resist the imposition of the standards of 'others'. Nor can one adopt a laissez-faire approach

where communities of practices are left to their own devices. What is needed is some kind of balance between prescription of standards by the Authority (SAQA) and the autonomy of communities of practice to interpret these standards and translate them into everyday practices.

To return to an earlier analogy, SAQA at the apex of the NQF plays a similar role about implementation of the objectives of the NQF as the constitutional court plays about the juristic implementation of constitutional values. There is however a crucial difference in the nature of their authority. As final arbiter or ultimate judge, the authority of the court is expressed through prescriptive judgements or edicts to which there is no further appeal. The legitimacy of the court depends on the juristic logic underpinning its judgements. In contrast, the authority and legitimacy of SAQA depend on the democratic consent and agreement of its participant stakeholders.

Building a democratic nation

Once again, we are drawn to the intimate interconnections between building a democratic nation and building an NQF. So far, we have concentrated on the democratic aspects of education. It will be useful to look at the connection from the 'other side' and explore the educational aspects of democratic nation-building. One way of doing this is to provide a sketch of a debate between three of the most renowned philosophers of our time. The debate itself reflects three positions on the possibility of enlightened consensual democracies based on rational deliberation. These positions resonate with our discussions above on the NQF.[2]

Habermas is a public intellectual passionately committed to promoting a rational universalism in political and moral questions. As Pensky comments:

> The central claim of Habermas's theories is that the institutions based on the communicative use of human reason, from our moral institutions to the institutions of the democratic constitutional state under the rule of law, are reasonable and not merely the contingent consequences of historical circumstances (Habermas, 2001:ix).

Habermas shows how the development of the nation-state in the nineteenth century expanded the parameters for the implementation of human rights and democracy and made social integration possible in a context where the bonds of ancestry and dialogue were breaking down, and modernisation and colonialism were disrupting the social, political and economic fabric of societies (Habermas, 2001:18). The great achievement of the nation-state was its ability to hold the spirit of the people, a universalising democratic constitutional state and a market economy in a constitutive

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2 *This sketch draws heavily on Rehg and Bohman (2001) and Habermas (2001)*

tension that led, in its most beneficial manifestations, to the social democratic welfare states that emerged in western Europe after 1945 (*ibid.,*16). The success of the nation-state, claims Habermas, depended on its ability to manage three forces that hold society together: solidarity, money and administrative power (*ibid.,*154).

The advent of the twenty-first century has seen the nation-state rapidly losing its effectiveness and relevance as the globalisation of market economics is accompanied by the emergence of supra-national organisations, such as multi-national corporations, the World Trade Organisation, the United Nations, the European Union, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and various regional trading and development associations. These supra-national organisations are able to escape democratic accountability and 'national' regulation and operate in an anarchic international arena that allows for massive inequalities, unfair trade regimes, large-scale poverty and violence.

Habermas claims these excesses can only be restrained by global institutions and regulations that are underpinned by a legitimacy emerging from popular processes of collective will formation through political participation and basic human rights (*ibid.,*76). The emergence of a European public sphere and political culture embracing human rights and democracy intimates the possibility of supra-national politics catching up with globalising markets and developing sufficient 'technologies of governance' to domesticate them (*ibid.,*52). This possibility rests on the evolution of large-scale active membership of civil society organisations that have the capacity to call global agents to account (*ibid.,*57). For Habermas, a cosmopolitan universal solidarity based on rational communicative action in a democratic public sphere is the only hope humanity has of taming the wild beasts of a global market place.

Habermas provides a clear and succinct genealogy of the 'communicative idealisations' that underpin his universalising pragmatism:

- A common objective world
- The accountability of subjects
- The unconditional validity of truth and rightness claims
- The implicit orientation to discursive justification.

These idealisations are presupposed by speaking and acting subjects and explain, from a participant's perspective, the 'operations' that actors must accomplish when engaged in communicative action and rational discourse (Rehg and Bohman, 2001:36). These 'unavoidable presuppositions of argumentative practice' are foundation stones for Habermas's re-thinking of the Enlightenment project, where solidarity and progress towards social and personal emancipation can be realised through a 'purposive reason' capable of abstracting from specific historical contexts and constructing through communicative action a constitutional democracy under the rule of law.

Habermas's account is equally pertinent to the NQF and communities of practice. It is the bringing together of universalising communicative values and particular communities of practice that strengthen social cohesion and expand inclusion. It is through purposive reasoning that we are able to achieve a balance between sufficient individualisation for self-realisation (of a person, profession, disciplinary field, or institution) and sufficient relatedness for collective projects such as building an NQF.

Unsurprisingly, Habermas's views are contested. One of his prominent critics, Richard Rorty eschews critical theory's universalising tendencies and dispenses altogether with context-transcending ideas of truth, objectivity and universal agreement (*ibid.,*42). Rorty wants to replace universal agreement by modest communities of agreement that nurture a mutual provisional understanding through fragile practices of negotiation. For Habermas, it is theoretically and practically possible to improve society through 'critical' theory understood as reasoned discourse (*ibid.,*42). For Rorty, belief in the power of theory, however critical, is illusory utopianism that impedes the very goal it seeks. According to him, the most we can hope for is a broadening community of agreement oriented towards attaining more happiness by cooperation *(ibid.,*47). Rorty favours a contingent pragmatism and an emphasis on practice. Habermas prefers a universal pragmatism and an emphasis on theory.

Many postmodernists, on grounds similar to those articulated by Rorty, soundly reject Habermas's utopian vision of a rational process catalysing emancipatory development. These critics see Habermas as guilty of constructing a meta-narrative, mystifying and reifying reason, excluding multiple other 'irrational' voices and contributing to the maintenance of those very forces of violence and inequality that he opposes. Habermas characterises the alternative vision offered by postmodernism as similar to that of neo-liberalism, offering a life-world of individuals and small groups constituted as nomads who are functionally co-ordinated but not socially integrated (Habermas, 2001:88). He praises the critical effects of postmodernism with its explorations of exclusions and its challenging critiques of modernity and enlightenment, but he sees it as failing to understand the potential of our present context of a universalising modernity and as guilty of a linguistic idealism that assumes an incommensurability of meaning that undermines communicative action. Hence, postmodernism is unable to distinguish between colonising and convincing discourses; it lacks the criteria to make evaluations necessary for political decision-making (*ibid.,*148). For example, how do I argue with others about health policy if I do not have criteria that enable me to distinguish between different policy options and strategic actions? A basic commitment to happiness or wellbeing is too vague to generate criteria and could only cease to be vague if subjected to the very kind of normative reasoning process to which the critics object.

The appearance of incommensurability between Habermasian discourse and the pragmatism of a Rorty or various forms of postmodernism may mislead one into exaggerating differences and obscuring similarities. Politically, they share in the broadest sense a commitment to democracy and the rule of law, and their pragmatisms may be very different, but they would agree on many things with which they disagree (Kantian idealism, Cartesian subjectivity, platonic forms, fascism, racism). For Rorty, critical theorists and philosophers have no claim to a privileged position in democratic decision-making processes of social change because of their profession. Their discipline, in the absence of normative discourses of truth, objectivity and universal agreement, does not help them play an important socio-political role; critical theorists should eschew a universalising conception of solidarity and settle for much more modest and provisional communities of agreement (Rehg and Bohman, 2001:52).

In an attempt to chart a middle course between the universalism of Habermas and the particularity of Rorty, Thomas McCarthy concedes the need to contextualise reason, but rejects a strong incommensurability between contexts thereby maintaining the possibility of provisional agreements across different contexts (Rehg and Bohman, 2001). The practices of reason may not lead to emancipation but they require a normative orientation if they are going to head in the 'right' direction whether this be wellbeing, happiness or stability. This conception of reason has strong similarities with our earlier discussion of Bernstein's regulative discourse and of the value-laden nature of pedagogic practice and with the purposive nature of communities of practice.

For McCarthy, the agreements on normative orientations required for a deliberative democratic decision-making do not require universal presuppositions. He maintains that grounding these by research into agents and systems of governance in specific contexts is sufficient. As with the argumentation that underlies democratic decision-making, apply a similar criteria to this research as used for the evaluation of scientific argumentation. A scientific argument need not be grounded in the counterfactual assent of a 'universal audience' but rather in the potential relevance and contextualisability of the practices and outcomes of scientific argumentation across a variety of contexts (Rehg and Bohman, 2001:133).

For McCarthy, a political decision is a provisional outcome of a process of democratic deliberation that has the ability to produce a decision even when there is no agreement to be had (Rehg and Bohman, 2001:316). We will continue to have ethical disagreements with practical social and political consequences for as long we differ on how we define key ethical concepts and issues: freedom, equality, respect for the sanctity of life, immigration, abortion, cloning. These do not prevent us, however, from making political decisions provided we have just and legitimate procedures to reach a provisional closure (*ibid.,*304).

The relevance of this to our earlier discussion of agreement within and between communities of practice is immediate: disagreement need not mean disarray. Communities of practice can contain disagreements and contested decision-making provided there is a predisposition towards researching 'tension-points' and being willing to examine these with 'scientific' rigour.

In the context of schooling, Bernstein (1996) provides insight into how tension-points can be sources of enlightenment or enhancement. Bernstein specifies the 'inclusion', 'participation', and 'enhancement' of pupils as being necessary preconditions for democratic education. Bernstein explains his concept thus:

> I see 'enhancement' as a condition for experiencing boundaries, be they social, intellectual or personal, not as prisons, or stereotypes but as tension points condensing past *and* opening possible futures. Enhancement entails a discipline. It is not so much about creativity, although that may be an outcome; enhancement has to do with boundaries and experiencing boundaries as tension points between the past and possible futures. Enhancement is not simply the right to be *more* personally, *more* intellectually, *more* socially, *more* materially, it is the right to the means of critical understanding and to new possibilities (Bernstein 1996:6, emphasis in original).

From Bernstein's perspective, the kinds of tensions discussed in this paper are to be welcomed as opportunities for 'enhancement', rather than being regarded as problems or weaknesses in our understanding of democracy and education.

A contextualised pragmatism grounds critique in practice itself, so that '…formulated idealisations gain their effectiveness in virtue of their local relations' (Rehg and Bohman, 2001:137). These idealisations can be located in contexts in ways that are indexical and contestable, rather than universalisable and presupposed. They are provisional and partial claims that certain kinds of institutions and practices appear to promote wellbeing by 'domesticating' administrative forces of the state and economic forces of the market. In addition, this 'domestication' is inextricably interwoven with a commitment to a rational and moral discourse that is procedurally embodied in institutions and practices.

McCarthy would agree with Habermas that we need to 'domesticate' bureaucracies and markets (*ibid.,*422) but he would not share Habermas's optimism regarding the effectiveness of critical theory in resolving specific disagreements or differences. Nor would he agree with the likelihood of a universal moral discourse of justice assimilating the multiple pluralisms that make up human societies. The growing inequalities between wealthy and poor people and strong and weak nation-states mark contested power relations and boundaries that permeate the evolving global fabric of economic markets, administrative agents and cultures. In this global context

of exclusion and fragmentation, of distrust and malpractice, McCarthy's 'pragmatic' critical theory provides a nuanced mediation of a set of constitutive tensions embedded in the fabric of society: theory/practice, self/other (narcissism/relatedness), national spirit/human rights, universal/contingent, contextualised/decontexualised. This approach allows for the possibility of rational discussion and negotiation leading to sufficient compromise between different perspectives and orientations to make decisions without full agreement.

Conclusion

What are the implications of these theories for constructing a socially inclusive and cohesive NQF? We suggest that McCarthy's pragmatic critical theory offers us a useful theoretical framework especially when supplemented by the theories of Bernstein. We must avoid the siren-call of prescriptive universalism and steer clear of the shoals of laissez-faire relativism. Rather we must chart a middle way where quality standards are contingent, albeit universalising. Where communities of practice interpret guides in different but not incommensurable ways. Various organisational models may be appropriate to realising this middle way. One example found in South Africa is an approach that favours a nested framework with generic standardising level descriptors forming the outermost layer within which are contained layers of increasing specificity for qualification descriptors (Bachelors, Masters) and for qualification designators (Bachelor of Science) with an innermost layer for providers to generate programmes leading to specialised qualifications. This model allows some autonomy to the provider within constraints provided by the increasingly generic layers of standardising descriptors.

The generation of these layers of descriptors can be undertaken by appropriate communities of practice enabling these communities to participate in both the generation and interpretation of standards. Through processes of rational deliberation, attunement, consensus seeking, decision-making based on sufficient agreement and a tentative attitude towards the contingency of our beliefs and practices, it may be possible to develop increasingly democratic and inclusive communities of practice participating in standards-setting and quality assurance (Harley and Parker, 2006:10).

The ideal community of practice achieves a balance between exclusivity and inclusivity – striving towards greater democracy and inclusivity but not at the expense of the necessary competencies that constitute the purpose, meaning and good of the community. From an epistemological perspective, a community of practice is built on a common reservoir of knowledge, skills and values without which it could not exist. The importance of democracy, inclusivity and equality as goals for our social enterprises should not outweigh the importance of the purpose of a practice. For example, doctors ought to be competent if we are to award them our trust. Any

form of action that puts this competence at risk will undermine our trust and social cohesion. Those participating in standards-setting and quality assurance ought to be competent in the field in which they are operating. This implies that the majority are drawn from the communities of practice that inhabit the field.

A rational deliberative approach to building a common language and developing increasingly commensurable practices is praiseworthy in its expression of the moral regulative intent of the NQF; it is unfortunately also too ideal and utopian. The realities of poverty and inequality in South Africa, of different class interests and diverse identities pose serious challenges to this rational approach that lead to suspicion and mistrust. In whose interests is rationality operating? Why should intellectuals and experts have privileged access to standards-setting and quality assurance?

SAQA as the authority overseeing the development of the NQF continuously has to address these tensions. The importance of education and its concomitant levels of competence have to be balanced by the importance of inclusivity and democracy. The interrelatedness of these 'public goods' is captured most clearly by their dependence on processes of initiation and induction into communities. This paper has argued that education and democracy are preconditions of each other: one cannot have education without democracy, nor can one have democracy without education. If we ask which comes first we are faced with a chicken-and-egg type dilemma. One way of avoiding this kind of Catch-22 situation is to see communities of practice as the precondition for both education and democracy – as the medium within which enlightening and enhancing personal and social practices flourish. In other words, without flourishing communities of practice, the NQF is unlikely to achieve its objectives.

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THE SOUTH AFRICAN NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK (NQF) AS A 'SOCIAL CONSTRUCT' OR NOT?

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Abstract
In this essay I shall explore whether the NQF can legitimately be referred to as a 'social construct' or whether it is a process that is still in the making. My contention is that the NQF is constituted of elements that justify it being referred to as a 'social construct'. However, since it does not at this stage present itself as having been subjected to some form of serious public deliberation, its status as a 'social construct' needs to be contested. Moreover, the fact that the NQF seems to be guided by an instrumentalist view of education undermines its claim to being a 'social construct'. I conclude this essay with a discussion on how 'leadership as friendship' can contribute towards enacting the NQF discourse as a 'social construct'.

Some gaps in claims that the NQF is a 'social construct': a lack of substantive or thick democracy
I take my cue from Keevy's recommendation in his doctoral dissertation that there is a critical need to understand the NQF as a social construct (Keevy, 2005:516). This critical need to understand the NQF as a social construct finds expression in the views of Cosser, Isaacs, Mokhobo-Nomvete and Gunthorp (1999), who claim that because the NQF is characterised by democratic participation, it should be considered as a social construct. Likewise, Cosser (2001:157) corroborates this claim on the basis that the NQF is a consensus-oriented discourse – one underscored by negotiation (Kraak and Young, 2001:30) and contestation (Isaacs, 2001:124). On face value there seems to be little wrong with considering the NQF processes as democratic and participatory, and premised on consensus, negotiation and contestation. However, such a notion of democratic participation seems to be restricted in the sense that people ('stakeholders' or participants) can participate and reach consensus through negotiation and contestation, but this does not necessarily mean that the consensus that has been achieved is necessarily defensible or reasonably justifiable. For instance, the consensus decision taken by the Inter-Departmental Task Team appointed jointly in 2002 by the Department of Education (DoE) and Department of Labour (DoL) to review and revise NQF legislation does not seem to have been justifiable despite the agency of democratic participation. The decision was to the effect that the strategic leadership of the NQF should exclude SAQA (South African Qualifications Authority) and be assumed by an Inter-Departmental NQF Strategic Team. that How could one exclude SAQA, the body that had been influential in shaping the initial NQF discourse and understood some of its hiccups from such a strategic initiative? The point I am making is that democratic participation based on consensus, negotiation and contestation is not sufficient to ensure substantive or thick democracy.

Instead, substantive democracy requires what Eamon Callan (1997:215) refers to as a conception of public deliberation characterised by the distress and belligerence (that is, a rough process of struggle) of confrontation that will naturally give way to conciliation as moral truth is pieced together from the fragmentary insights of conflicting viewpoints. For him, the idea of public deliberation is not an attempt 'to achieve dialogical victory over our adversaries but rather the attempt to find and enact terms of political coexistence that we and they can reasonably endorse as morally acceptable' (Callan, 1997:215). Through public deliberation, participants raise doubts about the correctness of their moral beliefs or about the importance of the differences between what they and others believe (a matter of arousing distress) accompanied by a rough process of struggle and ethical confrontation – that is, belligerence (Callan, 1997:211). If this happens, belligerence and distress give way eventually to moments of ethical conciliation, when the truth and error in rival positions have been made clear and a fitting synthesis of factional viewpoints is achieved (Callan, 1997:212). This is an idea of public deliberation (one with which I agree) where no one has the right to silence dissent and where participants can speak their minds. In the words of Callan (1997:201–202) 'real moral dialogue (as constitutive of substantive democracy), as opposed to carefully policed conversations about the meaning of some moral orthodoxy, cannot occur without the risk of offence, an offence-free school [I would say, the NQF process] would oblige us to eschew dialogue'. On the one hand, it does seem that some participants in the NQF process (DoE and DoL) became culpable of steering the process in a way whereby preference is no longer given to the substantiveness of articulated views. Rather, these participants (stakeholders) seem to focus solely on who their colleagues are (and might be) and not on what they substantively have to say. Small wonder Young (2003) calls for a more nuanced understanding of 'communities of trust'. On the other hand, SAQA should not be affronted when criticised for being too technicist and bureaucratic (CHE, 2003).

In addition, a thick form of democracy constituted by public deliberation also requires that we take into account people's linguistic, cultural and ethnic commonalities (Benhabib, 2002:162). The idea of finding a civil space for the sharing of different people's commonalities is based on the understanding that people need to learn to live with the otherness of others whose ways of being may be deeply threatening to our own (Benhabib, 2002:130). By creating a civil space (referred to by Benhabib [2002:127] as 'intercultural dialogue') where people can enact what they have in common and at the same time make public their competing narratives and significations, they might have a real opportunity to co-exist. In this way people would not only establish a community of conversation and interdependence (that is, they share commonalities), but also one of disagreement (that is, they do not share commonalities) without disrespecting others' life-worlds (Benhabib, 2002:35 and 41). Put differently, when people are engaged in a conversation underpinned by interdependence and disagreement, they engage in a legitimate dialogical process with a collective identity – they share commonalities and respect the differences of others.

Thus, on the basis of the accounts of deliberative democracy of Eamon Callan and Seyla Benhabib, it seems premature to refer uncontestedly to the NQF as being a social construct, because such a construct not only requires procedural democratic participation but also substantive, deliberative engagement. Substantive democracy can be very helpful as the NQF stakeholders endeavour to integrate vocational and academic training in relation to the designated NQF bands, levels (1–10) and pathways.

On the limits of an instrumentalist view of education

Jonathan Jansen is not necessarily wrong when he claims that the NQF lacks a 'credible theory of action' (2004:89). This is so despite claims by Samuel Isaacs that outcomes-based education and training (OBET) was not fully debated in the early stages of NQF implementation and as a result, OBET 'became caricatured with often narrow technicist and behaviourist curriculum reform initiatives' (Isaacs, 2001:128). Such a defence of learning outcomes predetermined in advance is understandable, because the NQF is committed to a system of education and training that is organised around the notion of learning outcomes (SAQA, 2000:11). The question is: what is so pernicious about an education system that is built around a process of specifying outcomes in advance that learners have to achieve (and then be given a specific qualification as per NQF level)?

Debates on the educative feasibility of an outcomes-based approach to education and training have by no means been exhausted. Instead, it seems as if many proponents of OBET have deliberately avoided debate on the issue on the basis that no other alternative education system but OBET has been considered as sufficiently justifiable to ensure moving away from apartheid education policies. I share David Solway's view that OBET might develop in learners 'only the feeblest sense of individual obligation for their performance and will not likely grow [that is, learners] into autonomous selves capable of reflection, intellectual dignity, and moral answerability for their own accomplishments or even for lack of such' (Solway, 1999:64). By now, there is sufficient evidence that an OBET programme seems to objectify goals, desirable learner outcomes and step-by-step procedures in which everything can be mechanically solved. OBET's aim to produce measurable outcomes testifies to its focus on objectification that regards the world as an object detached from the self-understandings of people, preoccupied with exercising power and control over their environment, nature and others.

But how can the outcomes – such as those related to empowering learners to think creatively, enabling learners to evaluate information critically, and facilitating the process whereby learners construct their own meanings of education – all be linked to a form of control that is perceived to be pernicious for education? Approached in a different way, why is control deemed so harmful for the OBET programme? Jardine (1992:118) posits that objectification, in this instance specifying outcomes, exhibits

‘the desire for finality, the desire for control, the relentless lust to render the world as a harmless picture for our indifferent and disinterested perusal’. My emphasis is on the link Jardine establishes between the ‘desire for finality’ and the ‘desire for control’. More significantly, the belief that education is something we can instrumentally control by specifying outcomes alone is to disengage learners and educators from the social practice that makes education what it is.

Moreover, control can be multi-fold: control is associated with one’s urge to manage, regulate and order. It may also be rooted in fear of the unknown, that is, control is considered to be a shield as one encounters the strange (Gadamer, 1992:233). Controlling education in an outcomes frame through an emphasis on specified outcomes, and at the same time acknowledging that specifying outcomes should be open to examination and criticism, compels one to acknowledge that these outcomes cannot be final and fixed, and that possibilities for new and different outcomes do exist. If controlling an education system in the sense referred to here means that such a system should remain ‘open’ to possibilities and challenges, then the system should make it possible to explore alternatives or establish conditions to do so. Rather than specifying ‘right’ outcomes for learning experiences, education ‘is a knowing with/in our doing, what Derrida terms to do and to make come about, as well as to let come about’ (Lather, 1998:497).

Specifying outcomes that emphasise the development of, say, critical, problem-solving and communicative learners is precisely the condition that would curtail such development. The establishment of such a form of control would further prevent learners from becoming critical, interactive problem-solvers. Being open does not just happen; it represents:

> …an ongoing choice, a conscious willed decision nourished by hope and desire…being open both requires and sustains agency, realised in persons who intend, enjoin, judge, direct, and take responsibility for their actions. Each of us must choose to ‘open up’ another or be *open* in her place. The decision to be open thus is a life-orientation, requiring a form of control we call self-discipline (Kerdeman, 1998:263).

Outcomes that are there seem to be specifications that have already been decided or ‘opened up’ for learners and educators, who now have to sustain their implementation. In a different way, the choice appears to have been made for learners to be critical prior to their having developed the self-discipline to be critical. Deborah Kerdeman (1998:264) claims that ‘the primary purpose of education is to foster the self-discipline that is necessary for understanding how to be open and present’.

Education within an OBET framework seems to be rigidly confined to what Solway (1999:60) describes as ‘a pre-established curricular regime’ dominated by plan, routine, perpetual assessment and mechanical didactics as the latest incarnation of

positivistic philosophy. Such an OBET programme, in my view, seems to be blind to the emergence of unforeseen ideas, referred to by Solway (1999:58) as 'the lucky find, the unexpected insight…the reading around the subject, the gift of the unlikely'. Similarly, an NQF framework that is guided by an OBET approach cannot be exonerated from an educational dynamic that is incommensurate with the unexpected, unlikely and unpredicted. Quite expectedly, an NQF framework 'steered' by an OBET approach has the potential to become a controlling, instrumentalist mechanism that would pose a serious challenge to its status as a social construct. This is so on the basis that control cannot co-exist with the autonomy and inter-subjectivity of social beings.

The NQF discourse and strong leadership

I agree with the claim that the NQF discourse can be sustained as a social construct if spearheaded by strong, strategic leadership (Keevy, 2005:449). In the remaining section of my essay I wish to explore what constitutes the kind of strong leadership that could promote the idea of the NQF as a social construct. For a defensible account of leadership I draw on the work of Nancy Sherman (1997), who offers an Aristotelian account of leadership as a virtue that can engender friendship – the idea of 'doing things together' – a kind of mutuality whereby one engages another and is engaged in return (Sherman, 1997:193). For Sherman (1997:204), mutuality can be captured in Aristotelian phrases such as 'spending days together', 'spending time together', 'living together', 'acquiring experience of one another and becoming familiar with each other's habits', as well as in more transient interactions such as a great conversation, knowing glances, a moment of shared repartee that lasts no longer than an instant, yet captures in that moment the magic of a special connection. For me, such a notion of friendship that requires time and familiarity with each other's characters on the basis of doing things *with* each other, cannot be separated from the relationship that ought to exist between participants in the NQF discourse. Why? Leading and being led are not separate and mutually exclusive activities that occur independently of each other. They are mutually integrated – without leadership there can be no leading, and without leading, leadership plays no role. So, leading and being led are constituent practices of co-operative, shared human activity that, like friendship, rely on time and familiarity. Because leading, being led and friendship seem to have mutual engagement in common, it would be wise to look at some of the constitutive meanings of friendship espoused by Sherman in order to establish more possibilities for cultivating strong leadership.

Sherman's articulation of mutual engagement, or friendship, is underscored by three interrelated ideas: mutual attachment, mutual attunement and mutual action. First, to be attached to a person (to be a friend) is to offer love and concern to that person, and upon separation or loss, grief and mourning. Put differently, friendship involves a mutual willingness on the part of one to give priority to another in terms of resources and time (Sherman, 1997:199–200). The idea of becoming mutually attached to one another is to lay the groundwork for people (in this instance, leaders and those being

led) to shape themselves (in order to strengthen and stabilise feelings of trust, goodwill and mutual benefit) in terms of the characteristics they approve of, by correcting one another, and by 'learning from the strengths and wisdom of another' (Sherman, 1997:206–207). It is this idea of correcting one another and learning from each other in an atmosphere of trust, goodwill and mutual benefit that holds much promise in reshaping leadership beyond giving 'instructions' as required by the NQF discourse. Second, friends are attuned to each other if they can relax their boundaries and be stimulated by one another so that 'with another mind we [and they] can think and act more effectively' (Sherman, 1997:208). By relaxing one's boundaries, a person (friend) wants to see him/herself with greater accuracy, flaws and all – that is, to be attuned to one another is to embark on a sort of 'practical reflection' (Sherman, 1997:212). In a different way, mutual attunement involves people being interested in coming to know themselves and learning to assess through argument and thought whether their actions and emotions are indeed fine (Sherman, 1997:212). This idea of coming to know oneself through argument and thought has the potential to undermine the 'uncritical acceptance' of anything NQF 'stakeholders' expect SAQA leaders and the led to implement.

Third, to act mutually entails doing so with zest and energy that which enables us to 'keep our activity [in this case, the NQF discourse] alive and continuous, in a way that we find pleasant' (Sherman, 1997:213). More aptly, Sherman (1997:213–214) posits that

> Friends keep us active and alive, not like some vitamin pill we might pop but, more often, by stimulating new interests and ends, and by introducing us to new activities that bear the mark and value of their transmission…They fuel us with ideas and possibilities that were not on the horizon before. The activities 'actualise' us; they don't merely keep us active.

In this regard Karl Popper's fallibility thesis seems apposite for cultivating the NQF discourse, where the outcomes achieved would always be inconclusive and where there always remains more to learn. For Popper, leading (in this instance, decision-making) is not a passive articulation of information, but derives rather as a result of 'active attempts to solve problems by trial and error' (Berkson and Wetterson, 1984:6). For Popper, 'problems' refer to experiences of something contrary to our expectations and the upsetting or disappointing of our expectations initiates the process of discovery by trial and error. Trials then, are attempts to correct our expectations so that they might be consistent with the surprising or unknowable event, and an error is an attempt that indicates a failure to account for both the surprising event and our past experiences (Berkson and Wetterson, 1984:7). So, if outcomes can be considered as experiences gained through learning that might be contrary to our expectations, then we need to set a process of learning by trial and error in motion that would enable us to revise or adjust our views in order to come closer to an unknowable

event. And, once knowable, this experience (as outcomes are referred to) becomes another problem to be corrected consistent with something else unknowable or surprising. In this way outcomes are never conclusive, but are always experiences that can be improved on further (what Popper refers to as reconstruction) to encounter what is other and unknowable through trial and error – to reach a new stage in the evolution of our experience (Popper in Berkson and Wetterson, 1984:8). The point I am making is that outcomes (as a result of decision making) can never be conclusive for that would mark the end of the NQF discourse. Instead, outcomes ought to be treated as momentary experiences that should invariably be built on through trial and error (that is, through correction of mistakes) and on the basis of which new experiences not thought of before could ensue – a practice that cultivates people's sense of inventiveness to reach out for unexpected possibilities. In this way, the NQF discourse can consolidate its path towards being a social construct.

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A RESPONSE TO YUSEF WAGHID – THE NQF AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT OR NOT?

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The NQF is a social construct

The NQF is without question a social construct. It may be that I am operating from a commonsense definition of a social construct which differs from that being used by Waghid – but he has not made my task easier by not defining his use of this term. My intuitive understanding of the term is that a social construct is a notion constructed and sustained by mutual agreement between people. Social constructs are therefore always a product of a particular location and history. Much of what we know is socially constructed and changes over time (as any enthusiastic reader of Bill Bryson will know). The authority from which our knowledge is derived is sometimes the objective proof of 'science', but it always has the appearance of rationality and for the construct to be cohesive, it must have sufficient consensus amongst people using the term or idea to sustain rational discourse. Challenges to the consensus will result in modifications of the 'construct'. Ideas can gain ascendancy that are morally flawed, have not been the subject of robust critical engagement and that are rationally inconsistent, but they remain social constructs.

The need to understand the NQF as a social construct is at the heart of its legitimacy. For a policy instrument to succeed it must be supported. My favourite section of the ANC's *Policy Framework for Education and Training* (1995) is the chapter on policy process and the management of change in which the following points are made – and these are the ideas that shape my understanding of the NQF as a social construct:

- In democratic systems of government, policies must be arrived at through open social and political processes which involve all major stakeholders and interest groups, and which citizens feel free to influence…(they) can only succeed if the affected organs of civil society feel that they are partners with a stake in the outcome (*ibid.,* 1995: 7).
- For a policy to have a chance of success, a sufficient number of people must be persuaded that it is right, necessary and implementable. Almost any education and training policy will fail in practice if it does not win the support of two essential constituencies: those who are expected to benefit from it, and those who are expected to implement it (*ibid.,* 1995:8).
- It follows that flexible and adaptable policies are likely to be the most successful. Rigid and dogmatic policies will be brittle and easily broken (*ibid.,* 1995: 9).

For me, it is without question that the NQF is a social construct and the questions which this colloquium must address include the extent to which it is responsive to

changing social, political and economic contexts and if key stakeholders, and citizens in general, still believe that it is developing in a way that it is 'right, necessary and implementable'.

A response to Yusef Waghid

As I understand Waghid's argument (with which I do not fully agree and certainly do not always follow) it is that the NQF will always be 'in the making' as we seek to explore and invent new possibilities in a democratic discourse. With that, I cannot disagree. My problems with his piece include the way he (or so it seems to me) sets up false dichotomies ('a social construct' OR 'a process in the making'; 'democratic participation based on consensus, negotiation and contestation' OR 'public deliberation characterised by distress, belligerence of confrontation') with a range of observations and conclusions for which he provides no evidence and which fail to persuade.

However, I admire Waghid's strong commitment to strengthening the democratic and rational base of the NQF – his dedication to the ideals of participation in policy formulation and to processes of public deliberation that improve the quality of ideas; his rejection of instrumentalism in education; and his desire to increase individual autonomy and mutual respect. On all of these counts, we agree.

Waghid has three pieces to his argument. First, by asserting a lack of substantive democracy in the social processes that sustain the NQF, he argues that consensus seeking does not necessarily give rise to rational outcomes. He then argues that robust forms of democratic intellectual engagement will inevitably have moral content. Last, he argues that fully democratic engagement requires respect for differences. Based on this set of arguments he concludes that it is premature to refer to the NQF as a social construct because this requires 'procedural democratic participation but also substantive deliberative engagement'. I do not believe that this conclusion is logically consistent (surely many social constructs are built on democratically flawed processes). However, I do not claim to be a philosopher and will not engage this set of arguments. However, I will examine the historic and current social processes that constructed the NQF, and which may or may not be sustaining it.

The second piece of the argument reaches the conclusion that:

> …an NQF framework, 'steered' by an OBET approach has the potential to become a controlling, instrumentalist mechanism which would pose a serious challenge to its status as a social construct. (Waghid, 2006)

I find this a breathtaking conclusion for several reasons. First, can social constructs never be instrumentalist and controlling? Second, this is premised on a rather reductionistic view of OBET that must be contested. I have not read Solway, but would be fascinated to see the evidence or argument provided that persuades Waghid

that OBET might develop in learners:

> …only the feeblest sense of individual obligation for their performance and will not likely grow [learners] into autonomous selves capable of reflection, intellectual dignity, and moral answerability for their own accomplishments or even for lack of such (Solway, 1999: 64, quoted in Waghid, 2006).

Again, I am not a philosopher, but it is my firm belief that these qualities cannot be subtracted from humanity. The education system does not shape humans without agency. An argument that contemplates the possibility that the innately human impulses to creativity and critical thinking can be constrained in this way is in itself inherently both a mechanistic and an exceedingly ambitious view of the power of education over the human spirit.

Similarly, whilst being no ardent proponent of OBET, I would like to see the arguments and evidence that have persuaded Waghid that:

> By now, there is sufficient evidence that an OBET programme seems to objectify goals, desirable learner outcomes and step-by-step procedures in which everything can be mechanically solved (Waghid, 2006).

Similarly, I need to understand the basis of the conclusion that OBET's '…focus on objectification [that] regards the world as an object detached from the self-understandings of people, preoccupied with exercising power and control over their environment, nature and others' (Waghid, 2006).

Both of these observations seem to me eminently contestable and without substance. In the time I have available, I cannot engage them and will leave them as questions for the colloquium to explore.

The third piece of the argument focuses on the NQF discourse and strong leadership. The main thrust appears to be that strong leadership is required if the NQF is to be successfully promoted as a social construct. Waghid constructs a view of leadership that builds trust facilitative of openness to new ideas. With this conclusion, I have no problem.

The NQF: A social construct as a necessary but not sufficient instrument of transformation

The NQF as a social construct does require closer examination in the context of the theme of the colloquium – 'The NQF as a socially inclusive and cohesive system'. In the remaining time, I will turn to a limited assessment of the current conjuncture with particular reference to social inclusion and cohesion. In doing this, I would like to examine how progress in the achievement of the goals for our society, specifically for education and training and the NQF, challenges social consensus, and may require re-articulation. I repeat my key questions: What has changed? How is the

NQF responsive and relevant to the challenges of changing social, political and economic contexts? Do key stakeholders (and citizens in general) still believe that the liberatory vision of the NQF is developing in a way that it is 'right, necessary and implementable'?

The NQF was necessary

The NQF was a construct of social forces operating to achieve a set of social, economic and political goals at a particular historical moment. It was born of hopes for an education that would empower a populace denied access to education under apartheid fully to participate, economically and socially. The symptoms of the crisis of apartheid education included over-crowded classrooms, high failure rates, exclusion, inequitable distribution of resources, and racial privilege. In the early 1990's, the popular political and moral critique of 'Bantu Education' was coupled with an economic critique in which the deeper consequences (recognised in the preamble to the Constitution) were identified as the profoundly damaging effects of apartheid education on the economy and society. Apartheid education:

> …resulted in the destruction of the human potential of our country with devastating consequences for the economic development of South Africa. This is evident in the lack of skilled and trained labour and the adverse effects of this on productivity and the international competitiveness of the economy (Essop, 1992:2).

The NQF was one of a complex set of education mechanisms that sought to respond to these political, social and economic imperatives. Politically, a qualification framework was needed that provided mechanisms to achieve redress and equity. Economically, the skills demands of a globalising economy required a public reconsideration of what constituted educational 'value' and an expansion of education access across fields historically separated by qualification frameworks and social status. The NQF and its central concept of flexibility through integration, progression and portability, responded to the political-moral imperatives and matched international moves to qualifications frameworks by responsiveness to economic needs. Ed French summarised this in his review of the 2005 NQF Colloquium:

> The quest for articulation was driven by the perception that historical education and training institutions and their curriculum were encrusted in dated assumptions and practices, locking the holders of qualifications into fixed ruts in life and work and excluding others from qualifications. An approach was needed that would create new relevance in learning and enable rapid responsiveness to economic imperatives and individual needs – especially those emerging in the context of globalisation (French, 2005:52).

He characterised the NQF as an ambitious project – commensurate with the expectation of transformation in a time of 'miracles':

> …the South African NQF was set up to redress the effects of a hated order,

> and to promote new paths to recognition and access that would be real, and not merely symbolic corrective acts. The NQF was to be an instrument for human dignity and human rights. It was to encompass the whole provision of education and training, not merely post-secondary preparation for work. It was intent on revolutionising both the curriculum and the institutions of provision (French, 2005:54).

French (2005: 53) identified the intended key beneficiaries of the NQF as:

- employed workers frustrated in career paths, either because of significant gaps in their education, or because of irrational formalities that made recognition of their skills difficult;
- the many millions of the unemployed or informally employed, especially those who had been denied anything like an adequate general education, and for whom conventional schooling was out of the question;
- the many young people going through schooling, or dropping out, who were likely to end up unemployable because an impoverished 'academic' education neither prepared them for university (to which most aspired without a hope of access) nor for making a living.

This is captured in the grand aspirations of the five SAQA objectives (SAQA Act No. 58 of 1995):

- to create an integrated national framework for learning achievements;
- to facilitate access to and mobility and progression within education, training and career paths;
- to enhance the quality of education and training;
- to accelerate the redress of unfair past discrimination in education, training and employment opportunities; and thereby
- to contribute to the full personal development of each learner and the social and economic development of the nation at large.

From a reading of the 2005 Colloquium proceedings, it appears that there was a robust evaluation of the achievement and frustrations of the previous ten years. The proceedings acknowledge the silence with respect to progress in reaching the key beneficiaries – the unemployed and the poor. They do not reflect in any depth on the achievement of objectives four and five, and in a limited way on objective three. Much of the debate focused on the first objective – the challenges of conceptualising and operationalising an integrated national framework for learning achievements.

The danger is that the considerable challenges inherent in objective one can be so consuming that we fail to recognise that the means are not impacting on the end. The social consensus on which the NQF was constructed may become increasingly precarious if the key beneficiaries do not experience the intended benefits. We must beware of being so immersed in constructing the instrument that we forget its purposes.

In evaluating what has changed, we need to consider the following:

- how is the NQF is responding to changing social, political and economic contexts?
- do key stakeholders, and citizens in general, still believe that the NQF is developing in a way that it is 'right, necessary and implementable'?
- if the difficulties of implementation mean greater flexibility is required – or a 'too brittle' NQF may be broken, do we need to examine if failures identified are conceptual, contextual, or structural?
- is it simply that change takes time, or do we need to change what we are doing?

The NQF is not a sufficient mechanism to achieve its goals

Education is not alone in experiencing the impermeability of those boundaries that keep the poor and the unemployed from access to social and economic participation. Education 'transformation' is but one of the essential elements of a set of strategies aimed at achieving reconstruction and development of society in South Africa.

It was an integral component of the set of goals that captured and articulated the mood and hopes, the aspirations of the majority. These were shaped by a specific history, nationally and globally. The scope and scale of the intended beneficiaries was, and continues to be, vast. We wish to halve unemployment and poverty while all evidence is that both continue to grow. However, the achievement of these goals is mutually interdependent. The NQF can only incrementally and successfully 'contribute to the full personal development of each learner and the social and economic development of the nation at large' to the extent that the nation at large incrementally experiences a range of social and economic benefits. The NQF needs to make an impact, and be able to demonstrate that impact and its relevance to the broad national project.

Focusing on what is important

While glancing through the presentation by David Raffe at last year's colloquium, I was struck by the extent to which the conditions for successful achievement of elements of the NQF reside outside the sphere of influence of a qualifications authority. This is perhaps why he was forced to conclude that the most successful NQFs build on what exists but achieve little transformation. What does this mean for us?

Politically and economically, we are learning that poverty is deep-rooted. Apartheid left a legacy of persistent inequality and poverty that has a racial and spatial profile and that has been entrenched in the past decades of low economic growth. Leibrandt, Van der Berg and Bhorat (2001: 3) and many others have shown that legislated discrimination 'skewed human capital endowments' with the consequence that unemployment has increased with strong spatial and racial dimensions. They (2001:10) argue that the labour force can be decomposed into groups based on their access to the modern economy. Some participate in the core consumer economy

(manufacturing, service sector, government), some are employed in marginal modern sectors (commercial agriculture, mining, domestic service) and some in the peripheral labour force (subsistence agriculture, the informal sector, and the unemployed). These categories echo the intended beneficiaries referred to earlier (French, 2005: 53). Numerically the picture is of a broad-based pyramid with the majority operating on the periphery.

SAQA needs to examine its efforts and its discourse and understand where the balance of its efforts and energies are expended in relation to these three groups. Is it the case that the existing hierarchy in the structures of power dominated the discourse at last year's proceedings? Are we disproportionately consumed by the challenges of the Higher Education sector, and less by what is happening in the SETAs and their promise of reach into the pool of the unemployed? Where do our efforts focus on those in the marginal modern sectors or even in the periphery?

This is a somewhat crude analysis, and it is included for the purpose of being provocative in the context of a colloquium (possibly emboldened by Waghid's invitation to belligerence!). However, a 'search' of the number of times that Universities, Higher Education, SETAs and learnerships were mentioned in the 2005 Colloquium concluding summary is revealing: Higher Education and Universities were mentioned 20 times, Learnerships four times (twice noting their absence), the unemployed once (by their absence) and SETAs (from what I could see), not at all.

Is this a consequence of strategic focus on the bastions of power, or because established structures are easier to engage than the amorphous needs of the marginalised and powerless? Is it because the epistemological issues concerning SAQA are seen as the domain of the Universities?

If the NQF is fulfilling its purpose as an instrument of social transformation, we must address several questions:

- Are we confident of the ways that we are strengthening quality and impacting on access? Are we brave enough to ask the questions: Has quality improved? Has access improved? What has been the role of the NQF in these improvements? What can we do to accelerate these changes?
- Are we changing the distribution of power in our discourse and strategies? Are the previously voiceless now heard? Has there been any change in the parity of esteem?
- Is recognition and access real, or merely symbolic?
- Might our neglect of the key intended beneficiaries be contributing to their further disempowerment?

If the NQF is to continue being a social construct that expresses the aspirations of the majority, we must ask ourselves:

- Are we investing sufficiently in communicating the relevance of our activities to those who so enthusiastically embraced the promise of the new dispensation but who remain excluded from its benefits? Can we keep alive a belief that they have a stake in the outcome of the NQF? Worse, do we still believe that our activities have relevance?
- We also need to examine what access stakeholders have to our debates. From a position of ignorance, I ask what engagement still occurs in any depth with unions, political parties, and other structures of civil society. How have our ideas been changed by these substantive engagements?
- To what extent do practitioners understand the NQF and are involved in the changes that it brings, or are they simply compliant with a new bureaucracy?[3]

Change is not easy. This we now know. Last year's colloquium reminded us that 'Even a superficial acquaintance with the history of revolutions will make the durability of institutions and embedded interests clear' (French 2005: 56). French refers to the disintegration of NQF structures attributed to turf wars at macro levels; personal vendettas among the highly placed; and the emerging academic 'epistemological' orthodoxy.

Are we slipping into a path of least resistance to the inevitable dominance of established institutions and responding disproportionately to engagement with these rather than focusing on less well-organised parts of the system that have the potential of making a greater impact on the poor and marginalised?

In doing so, are we becoming a new impenetrable bureaucracy that has replaced the old? Are we the new mandarins? Moreover, can we reverse this?

Social inclusion, social cohesion and the NQF

Social inclusion and social cohesion were central to the arguments that gave rise to the NQF as a one of the battery of solutions to the challenges we faced in 1994. To repeat an earlier point, apartheid education:

> …resulted in the destruction of the human potential of our country with devastating consequences for the economic development of South Africa. This is evident in the lack of skilled and trained labour and the adverse effects of this on productivity and the international competitiveness of the economy (Essop, 1992: 2).

[3] *The literature is replete with evidence that teachers, for example, do not understand the NQF. Govender et al. (2003: 361) provide an example of the agenda of a GDE teacher workshop having to be hastily reformulated when assumptions of teacher understanding of the NQF were wrong.*

Economic studies continue to show the centrality of human capital development and technology (and the interdependence of these) in economic growth. Van den Berg has demonstrated that international patterns of development point to a growing demand for skills and that '…the reduction of labour market inequality requires a substantial improvement in the supply of skills through an improvement in both the quantity and quality of education' (2001:181).

I have been careful to acknowledge that the NQF alone is not sufficient to meet the challenges of reducing unemployment and poverty and of deepening democratic participation. Nevertheless, I do believe that improvement in educational access and educational quality is an essential component of the broad suite of necessary strategies to achieve these goals.

We need to ask: are we focusing our energies strategically and systematically on those elements of the system that will have the greatest impact on our goals? On the other hand, are we doing what is easiest (difficult as I do not deny that it is) – constructing a bureaucracy that articulates with other bureaucracies to the neglect of key beneficiaries and the social consensus that gave the NQF its legitimacy? Finally, how do we make the NQF start working for its intended beneficiaries?

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GOING BEYOND THE BUZZ INTO THE REAL BUSINESS: A RESPONSE TO THE SECOND NQF COLLOQUIUM

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Introduction

Eleven years down the line from the creation of the NQF we are taking stock of its impacts – its intended and unintended consequences, the actual way in which it is unfolding. Where there is a definite sense of how its objectives and principles are reflected and achieved in practice and in effects (and where not). A central concern for many who attended the second NQF Colloquium was that practice must inform theory just as much as theory was intended to shape practice. What is happening on the ground in the worlds of education and training affected by the NQF must feed back into the conceptual discourse, monitoring and evaluation undertaken by SAQA and the NQF community – hence the title of this article.

Debates and discussions around various facets, ideas and realities of the NQF take place in a number of contexts and spaces. The 2005 Colloquium was billed as 'the first' NQF Colloquium, flagging it as a new arena for the ongoing discourse on NQF-related matters. What was new was that NQF users and watchers had a space in which to debate and critique issues. The purpose was to provide input into SAQA's own research agenda, thereby helping it fulfil its mandate to oversee the development of the NQF. Decisions around research areas are in themselves indicators of new directions or problem areas as our system unfolds, consolidates, or unravels.

The programme for the 2006 Colloquium was shaped by the themes that emerged from last year's colloquium. However, as in every human interaction, nothing is predictable: while groups valiantly began their debates guided by the topic that speakers had addressed, discussions often veered off in unexpected directions. However, this interaction between the formal topics and the issues that came up in the group discussions provided useful material for reflecting upon potential refinements and extensions of SAQA's ongoing research agenda aimed at prioritising action.

The papers presented at the colloquium and included in this publication speak for themselves. This article aims to capture debates generated by the papers and concerns raised by participants. I have grouped these into three main themes and present the main points from the papers and the group discussions. As suggested in the opening of this article, an overarching concern is the dynamic between conceptual discourse and operational practice as it relates to the various themes.

Overview

In the first session, Jim Gallacher traced the achievements and limitations of the Scottish NQF (SCQF) and used elements of this analysis as a framework through

which to reflect on aspects of our NQF. Sam Isaacs responded by adding detail to the playing out of these elements in our context, reflecting on some of the obstacles and power plays that the NQF confronts and describing it as a 'national work in progress'. Gallacher's conclusion, that NQFs should be seen as *instruments* of change rather than *agents* of change, suggests at its most literal level that a qualification framework in itself cannot proactively generate sweeping changes in the dynamics and outcomes of an education and training system. Rather, change can occur in one vehicle, in tandem with other forces in society and the economy and players in skills development. The implications of this on the role of our NQF were picked up in a number of ways throughout the colloquium.

The second session built on a key thread from the first colloquium: the concepts of communities of trust or practice. Ben Parker's paper aimed to get meaning into the phrase 'community of practice', to bridge the gap between research discourse and operational practices. A parallel analogy for this gap is the distance between the universal or generic and the particular. The NQF sets up 'universal' values or principles, but they are particularised in different sectors in different ways. Dr Qhobela's response picked up on the notion of a 'middle way' between a centralised, idealised prescriptive model and its opposite, a laissez faire model where all sectors involved in education and training do their own thing. He suggested that a more pragmatic model should be founded on principles of simplicity, flexibility, clarity, and trust as these apply to purposes, roles and boundaries.

In the final session, Yusef Waghid explored the NQF as an evolving social construct through the medium of various philosophies of social democracy. He put forward a theory of leadership of the NQF that allows spaces for dialogue between participants – an echo of the healthy contentions that can take place in and between communities of practice. While Mary Metcalfe's response took up some of the challenges of social construct discourse, she also posed questions that moved the discussion firmly into the realm of implementation: what has changed, do people believe that the NQF is developing in a way that is 'right, necessary and implementable' and if not, what is the scope and nature of its failures? These questions were echoed from a number of different perspectives and contexts throughout the colloquium.

These topics provide the framework in which group discussions took place. However, what was notable in the discussions was a strong feeling that conceptual discourse and reflections must be located in practice and in specific data – and that such practices and data need to come from across the different education and training bands and sectors to which the NQF refers. In other words, discussions were coloured by an anxiety about who is being heard and who is not, as well as who is interested in being heard and who is not, presences and absences that in themselves may reflect viewpoints on the relevance of the NQF.

Key themes

The NQF Objectives

The NQF objectives continue to be a central reference point in discussions on the emerging impacts of the NQF. The five objectives stated in the SAQA Act of 1995 are:

1. to create an integrated national framework for learning achievements;
2. to facilitate access to and mobility and progression within education, training and career paths;
3. to enhance the quality of education and training;
4. to accelerate the redress of unfair past discrimination in education, training and career opportunities; and thereby
5. to contribute to the full personal development of each leaner and the social and economic development of the nation at large.

Linked to these objectives are the principles of integration, relevance, credibility, coherence, flexibility, standards-based, legitimacy, accessibility and access.

Gallacher's comparison of the goals and scope of the SCQF and the South African NQF is illuminating. He suggests that our NQF, with its more ambitious objectives, greater tensions between the more varied stakeholder groups, uneasily co-existing agendas such as social justice and economic development and the resulting complexity of structures and processes, has perhaps taken on too much too soon. While these features have their roots in historical dynamics that we need not trace here, this sparked a number of interpretations of what this might imply (both conceptually and practically) in the South African context.

As a broad statement of intent, no one would disagree that the NQF objectives and their underpinning principles, are worthy of pursuit. Several people noted that there are many ways in which the instruments of the NQF objectives (for example, the critical cross-field outcomes) have gradually worked their way into the collective consciousness and have become tools for quality. However, there were strong feelings throughout the colloquium that certain elements of the objectives and principles were not being achieved. For example, goals such as portability of credits and articulation currently have little impact on learners. In some instances it was felt that NQF and SAQA structures and requirements have in fact restricted access to education and training opportunities, or have hampered mobility and progression – that is, they have had unintended consequences. Examples such as complexities linked to accreditation, or requirements around the compulsory Fundamental credits were cited. These views open up a number of complex arenas for debate. A few issues were mentioned that could be investigated such as, which 'educational opportunities' are the right ones for particular sets of learners; are there gaps where some educational opportunities should exist; are there common or different goals and purposes for different users of

education and training? If implementation is not achieving the NQF objectives, is the problem with the objectives, with complex structures, or with the implementers? What conditions are required to achieve effective implementation of objectives? Are these conditions the same for different bands, sectors and communities of practice? In addition, the following key question was not sufficiently explored: what is the role of policy in relation to identified problem areas in the NQF world? For example, is policy change a starting point for addressing these, or should policy be protected and other levers sought?

Gallacher posed the question of whether there is a case for revisiting the NQF objectives, or unpacking these into specification of priorities and key targets. Metcalfe issued a similar challenge, by suggesting that we need to examine whether '… failures identified are conceptual, contextual, or structural'. The view that the objectives as they currently stand are not achievable – that we need perhaps to reconceptualise 'change' in a more incremental way – was reiterated in several group discussions. In addition, there is a sense in which we talk to each other too loosely – at cross purposes – about the NQF objectives. The contexts and institutional landscapes in which these objectives are supposed to be achieved are very different in different bands and sectors of education and training, as are the needs of different groupings of learners and end users. The question is: do we need to reinterpret the objectives for different stakeholders, with short term objectives in relation to implementation? One participant suggested that the SAQA objectives should be linked to the concept of 'fit for purpose' within particular communities of practice: that is, the objectives should be contextualised within sectors and bands, and unpacked into realistic plans for specific target groups within time frames.

Beneficiaries of the NQF

Any consideration of the NQF objectives includes reflection on their intended beneficiaries. The discussion on who these are and how they are being served ebbed and flowed throughout the colloquium. In theory, the previously disadvantaged were prioritised because of the historical context in which the NQF emerged. As French points out in his 2005 Colloquium report, three groups were prioritised: employed workers blocked in advancement through lack of either education or certification, who needed career paths to open up; the unemployed or informally employed who lacked an adequate general education; and young people who, for various reasons, might end up as unemployable. Metcalfe notes in her paper that there is, in general, an acknowledgement that there is little progress in reaching the unemployed, the under-educated and the poor – those mentioned in objectives two and four. If the key beneficiaries are not experiencing the intended benefits, what does this say about the promise of the NQF?

Participants had much to say on this topic. Once again, the issue of 'voice' (or lack of it) was raised, especially in respect to the most marginalised. Is a 'qualifications

framework' the right conceptual framework to address issues that affect those for example, who either missed out on, or currently do not even have access to basic education? Moreover, there is silence from those who do have a voice such as, organised business and organised labour. Interestingly, Gallacher notes that the evaluation of the SCQF showed that 'engagement with employers has been limited' and that there had been 'slow progress in the area of vocational qualifications and work-based learning'. In the South African context, levels of engagement with the NQF are varied. For example, those dealing with training for occupations have invested much time and energy in standards generation and registration of qualifications. On the other hand, schooling and higher education have tended to withdraw from the NQF. In addition, the engagement from employers is patchy – there are complaints about the grant system, implementation issues around learnerships and doubts about the relevance of some of the qualification design criteria for skills shortages. As one participant said, 'stakeholders behave in ways necessary to them'. If stakeholders groups withdraw from the NQF, then the reasons for this need to be fully explored.

Participants also raised questions about the original prioritisation of beneficiaries. One comment was that in fact employers should be the beneficiaries, as they are in it for the long haul. Another comment was that the target should be providers, with the aim of steering them in a certain direction; still another, that skills development priorities should be the key target of the NQF. What these varying perceptions indicate, perhaps, is that the parameters of the NQF – and, by implication, the powers of SAQA – need to be more clearly articulated. One participant noted, with frustration, that South Africa 'has entangled everything in the NQF'. Behind this comment, lies the question: which components of an education and training system and which not, are the rightful terrains of an NQF? Put another way, what are the benefits of guiding frameworks and what are their limitations? We must also note that the NQF is one thing – a framework for qualifications. SAQA is another – a statutory body entrusted not only with overseeing the development of the framework, but also with certain quality assurance functions. Are there perhaps category confusions between the role of the NQF, some of SAQA's policies, and some of its structures? In other words, the fact that SAQA is criticised in one breath for not reaching certain beneficiaries and in another for over-regulation in some sectors, suggests that there is some blurring of its regulatory roles, its logical territory, and its partnership and consensus-seeking role. Would an exercise in clarifying SAQA's parameters help it to streamline and prioritise its own agenda?

Communities of practice

Throughout the colloquium, attempts were made to clarify the notion of 'communities of practice' so that this might best serve reflections on the development of the NQF. Parker's paper suggests that the idea of 'communities of practice' can serve as a conceptual tool to understand how the universal principles embodied in the NQF get translated into daily practice in the education and training world. Theories of communities of practice could be useful for seeing how far different practices in

different sectors can accommodate common values. In addition, the development of theories could help us understand how strengthening communities of practice can support change. Participants adopted various standpoints in responding to this topic. The range included: doubts as to whether there was any value in the idea as a means to building the NQF; concerns that the NQF itself may have created artificial and unworkable communities of practice; and passionate espousal of the notion of a 'meta' NQF community of practice whose elements would guide and shape specific communities of practice.

There was much debate on what the term actually means and some useful explorations of the various dynamics of the concept. While it was generally agreed that a community of practice must be fit for purpose and is characterised by shared knowledge and professional expertise, tensions were also identified in the concept. Some of the questions raised by participants can best sum up these. One participant noted that healthy contestation around traditions can take place within a community of practice, but other types of contestations can undermine progress. Examples of these were: ideological contestations around goals (such as polarised economic and social agendas, or needs-driven short-term goals versus longer term goals), or territorial contestations (who's the boss?). Do communities of practice entrench and legitimise existing agendas? Is the specialised discourse of a community of practice exclusionary in a negative way, or is this a condition for its professional functioning? Points were also made around who belongs to a community of practice – are the members providers, practitioners, stakeholders, managers, academics, bureaucrats, learners? And do these parties all have the same interests? If not, what map ensures that these fellow travellers are moving in the same direction?

One of the aims of the NQF was to bring various communities of practice (and other stakeholders) together into a shared vision for education and training. The democratising intent of the NQF was to be realised through an empowered education and training consumer, and in public trust in the system. Many participants pointed to SAQA and the NQF's solid achievements. For example, buy-in to the importance of the critical cross-field outcomes and the development of quality assessment practices. However, the irony of unintended consequences was also noted such as, confusion amongst learners and providers; diminished public trust in some instances; and dissonant policies between bands, quality assurance bodies and sectors. This raised the issue of the scope and ambitions of the NQF and its possible movement towards what was dubbed 'the middle way', or a more pragmatic and less prescriptive framework that still maintains core values.

What emerged as useful from the discussions around communities of practice was a sense that a deeper analysis of how these operate in different contexts could serve as a mechanism for understanding, in NQF terms, what is working and what is not. (Such analyses would take into account the very different ways in which the education and training in industry dynamics differ from those in education.) In this

way, certain elements of the NQF could be protected and nourished, while others could perhaps be reviewed. The notion of communities of practice as a conceptual tool for understanding implementation issues could inform case studies across sectors – a research route on which SAQA has already embarked.

In conclusion: continuing to build the research agenda

There was clear agreement that the time has come for the NQF community, with SAQA as its apex organisation, to move beyond policy debates and research into attitudes to the NQF's intents and basic structures, towards investigation of the real dynamics of implementation across sectors. How the world of regulations, policies and guidelines interacts with the world of daily practice and pragmatic needs, is a key object of study, in order to inform new directions. As Joe Samuels said in his summing up, the colloquium has shown that the NQF has reached a new stage in its development: Therefore, SAQA needs to re-examine its own roles and strategic agendas; the ways that it communicates with specific communities of practice and the larger world in general; and its continuing work with its development partners.

Many suggestions for areas of research were made at the colloquium, some of these SAQA has already identified in the research plans developed since the last colloquium. Broadly, the following were the key areas:

- The links between policy and implementation, theory and practice, intended and unintended consequences, as an iterative cycle

- The appropriate scope and parameters of an NQF and its supervisory organisation, SAQA (including possible rationalisation and simplification of NQF structures)

- The notion of communities of practice as the framework for research into different sectors, in terms of the achievement (or not) of NQF objectives and in terms of implementation issues

- The idea of a 'middle way' as a move from a strong centralised NQF towards a less prescriptive environment that would enable buy-in from different sectors
- The role of data in research, and the role of partnerships in research

The NQF as a developing framework is an ongoing object of study, evaluation and reflection. SAQA as the custodian of the NQF plays a leading role in these activities, and sees itself as the 'apex body' to take the NQF forward. It may be fitting to end this response to the colloquium with a suggestion that the role of an apex organisation, and the adoption of a defined meaning for the term, is itself an area for further research.

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