National Qualifications Framework in South Africa: a critical review

This presentation on 'National Qualifications Framework in South Africa: a critical review' is based on a paper on 'Lifelong Learning in South Africa' written jointly with my two colleagues K. Balasubramanian and Abdurrahman Umar. This was published in the International Journal of Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning. This presentation refers to an earlier version of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). This was amended in 2008 from 8- to a 10-level NQF.

I represent the Commonwealth of Learning, and our slogan is 'learning for development'.

As you may know, the Commonwealth of Learning, is an intergovernmental organisation established by the Commonwealth Heads of Government, over twenty five years ago. We work in 53 Member States that cover all regions of the globe from the Caribbean to Africa, South Asia and the Pacific.

Our mission is to help Commonwealth Member States and institutions to harness the potential of distance education and Information and Communication Technologies for expanding access to education and training. We work with governments to develop policies, with institutions and individuals to build capacity and with civil society organisations to create models of development that can be replicated in other jurisdictions.

Our headquarters are in Vancouver, Canada and we have a regional office for Asia in Delhi.

In this presentation, I will give you the context of education in South Africa, and the rationale for a National Qualifications Framework. I will then outline the status of lifelong learning in South Africa, look at the concept in some detail and examine how the concept translates into practice. This will be followed by an examination of how developments in technology impact lifelong learning. Then we will critically examine the country's National Qualifications Framework to determine whether it can serve as an effective tool for addressing the learning needs of diverse learners. I will then conclude with a set of recommendations for the improvement of the NQF at both conceptual and practical levels.

Let us first look at the context of education South Africa

The Republic of South Africa, is a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society with a population of 54 million citizens.

79.5 % of its population is black Africans, 9.2 % European, 2.6 % persons of Asian descent, and 8.8 % coloured or racially mixed people. In 1931, it was granted independence from Britain and the country continued to be ruled by the whites who followed a policy of apartheid or racial segregation. It was not until 1994 that apartheid was dismantled and the first universal elections were held.

There is a high rate of unemployment with a quarter of the population living on less than 1.25 dollars a day. 49.4 percent of the people are below the age of 25. This young population needs education and training to contribute to national development. In order to mitigate the adverse effects of apartheid, there are affirmative action policies in favour of the Blacks but these have not addressed the wider social and racial inequities

Even so, the 'Rainbow Nation' aspires to 'be at peace with itself and the world', to quote Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

Education is seen as one way of addressing the various inequalities within the country. Nelson Mandela believed that, *'Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education ...that the child of farmworkers can become the president of a great nation. It is what we make out of what we have, not what we are given, that separates one person from another'.*

South Africa has a 3-tier system of education: 7 years of primary school; five years in high school followed by tertiary education. Higher education can be pursued in the 23 public universities. The literacy rate in South Africa in 2010 was 88.0%, making South Africa 107th on the list of 180 countries around the world.

During the apartheid years, the education curriculum in the black schools was based on the belief that the black Africans had to be educated for 'certain forms of labour'. There was inadequate investment and poor quality of education in non-white schools.

Several initiatives were undertaken to correct these discrepancies in post-apartheid South Africa. In 2006, there was a re-structuring of education and two ministries were created: Higher Education and Training and Basic Education. The 36 existing tertiary institutions were re-

structured and merged into 23 institutions. In 2010, South Africa articulated a long-term vision of quality education in schools called Schooling 2025.

South Africa has a strong tradition of distance education and the University of South Africa (UNISA) was the world's first open university and became the model for the Open University UK. South Africa has recently developed a policy on Open Education Resources (OER).

The idea of National Qualifications Frameworks is increasingly becoming popular among nations that are seeking to reform their educational systems because it facilitates the harmonisation of national and regional/international qualifications, and the movement of labour and students across national boundaries. Qualifications Frameworks differ in terms of their coverage: some focus on one level or type of education e.g vocational education or higher education while others such as in South Africa, are comprehensive and inclusive of all levels and types of education irrespective of where the learning is delivered, be it in a formal institution or the workplace.

South Africa's Qualifications Framework was largely prompted by the desire to redress the inequities of the apartheid regime particularly "the legacies of job reservation and retrogressive and discriminatory training practices in the ……labour force by creating ladders of opportunity for learning and career pathways".

The five objectives of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) are to:

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

The NQF has eight levels:

- NQF Level 1, covers standards and qualifications in General Education and Training;
- NQF levels 2, 3, 4 deal with standards and qualifications in Further Education and Training; while
- NQF levels 5, 6, 7, and 8 cover standards and qualifications in Higher Education and Training.

It is significant that this NQF does not refer to the levels of formal education such as primary, secondary and tertiary, but includes training as well. The emphasis is on the outcomes achieved rather than on where these were acquired.

In order to implement the NQF, the government established the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) to :

a)   (i) Oversee the development of the National Qualifications Framework; (ii) formulate and publish policies and criteria for the registration of bodies responsible for establishing education and training standards or qualifications; and

b)   Oversee the implementation of the National Qualifications Framework,

The objective was to ensure a framework in which lifelong learning could take place.

South Africa embraced the concept of 'lifelong learning' since the early 1990's. What did this mean?

A 1993 report states:

'Although seemingly similar to continuing education, lifelong education is a more comprehensive and visionary concept which includes formal, non-formal and informal learning extended throughout the lifespan of an individual to attain the fullest possible development in personal, social and professional life. It views life in its totality, and includes learning that occurs in the home, school, community, workplace, and through mass media and other situations….' (p.9).

According to Aitchison (2004:2), there are two competing versions of lifelong learning in this policy: *'the one visionary and all-encompassing, the other driven by narrower interests related to training, competency and the world of work'*.

The policy framework for education and training written by the ANC in 1994 states that '*all individuals have access to lifelong education and training irrespective of race, class, gender, creed or age'*. How would this be achieved? The document states that '*we need to reorganize the delivery of education and training within an open learning framework. Open learning is an approach to education and training which seeks to remove all unnecessary barriers to learning, thus increasing access to, and allowing people to take advantage of learning opportunities throughout their lives'*.

The first White Paper on Education and Training appeared in 1995, which linked education and training as part of one integrated whole with the objective of promoting human resource development.

In 2001, a new National Skills Development Strategy was elaborated with the objective of '*developing a culture of high quality lifelong learning'* (Aitchison, 2004). Shirley Walters and Kathy Watters, noted that lifelong learning was needed for two reasons: one, to bring SA into the mainstream of the global economy and two, to promote social equity.

There is no dearth of policy statements in relation to lifelong learning in South Africa. All these documents see it as a continuum on the education and training spectrum relating to formal, non-formal and informal learning and consider it as a means to promote access and equity. How have these policies translated into practice? What systems have been developed, and what are the lessons for other countries that wish to implement lifelong learning?

Lifelong learning emerged as a concept in the 1960's with terms such as recurrent education, *education permanente.*

The Edgar Faure Report made the initial formal statement on Lifelong Education which highlighted a holistic approach for the complete development of an individual. The Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) believes that Lifelong Learning is based on three objectives: personal development, social cohesion and economic growth.

In the 70s, the focus was on *Lifelong Education* and in 1996 the Delors Report of UNESCO made the transition to Lifelong Learning. According to Preece, *'education' indicates a more provider led model of learning activity, whilst 'learning' suggests the focus is on the learner's needs. Similarly, education implies formal systems of provision, whilst learning suggests a wider notion of non-formal and informal systems.* The emphasis is shifting to learner centric approaches, the need for self-directed learning and the view that learning can take place in a variety of settings and contexts.

The European Commission (2001:33) defines Lifelong Learning as '*all learning activity undertaken throughout life with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective'.*

Many authors have noted substantial differences between perspectives of the 'north' and 'south' to Lifelong Learning. According to Motshekga-Sebolai (2003), in South Africa, the concept of Lifelong Learning initially linked learning and work with the focus on the incremental skilling of workers through formal and non-formal systems. Unlike Europe, the trade union movement in South Africa played a major role in defining the concept of Lifelong Learning addressing issues of equity and development needs.

As we have seen, there have been several statements on Lifelong Learning in South Africa. The Education Policy of South Africa defines Lifelong Learning '*as a continuous process which stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire and apply the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to realise their full potential'.* Let us examine these statements and policies in the light of a theoretical framework.

How does the concept translate into practice?

Medel-Añonuevo makes an important distinction *between lifelong learning as a common sense principle—of learning from the cradle to the grave— and lifelong learning as an educational principle that has to be realized in policies, programs and projects.'*

As an educational concept, the operationalization of Lifelong Learning involves the integration of three approaches: pedagogy, andragogy and heutagogy. While these three approaches are not mutually exclusive, they differ in many respects as we shall see in the following slides.

We note in this table how the three different approaches manifest themselves. In pedagogy, the learner depends on the teacher for what and how to learn, and the aim of the learning is to move up to the next level. Under andragogy, the adult learners are more independent, learn when they

need to and use their own experiences. But what is learned is determined by the teacher. We can see that the heutagogic approach applies to the independent learner, who determines what and how to learn and the learning is not planned and can take place anywhere.

We see that in pedagogy, the learning is subject-centred and leads to competency development. Andragogy is more problem based and again leads to competency development while the heutagogic approach goes beyond problem solving to reflection and results in capability development. This table captures the different dimensions of learning and we can see that pedagogic and andragogic approaches are deployed in the formal education system, which relies mostly on single-loop learning.

According to Argyris and Schon (1978) in single-loop learning, goals, values, and, to a significant extent, strategies are taken for granted. The focus is on improving the technique . In contrast, in double-loop learning, the learner reflects on the role of the learning systems which underlie actual goals and strategies .The underlying norms, values, beliefs and actions are assessed. Double-loop learning and self-reflection are important traits of the heutagogical approach. The competence and capacity-based approach of pedagogy and andragogy focuses on the acquisition of knowledge and skills while heutagogy places an emphasis on *capability* development which enables the learner *'to take appropriate and effective action to formulate and solve problems both in familiar and unfamiliar settings'* (Cairns, 2000:1). As elaborated in Sen (1993), capabilities denote a person's ability to make choices, function effectively and generate valuable outcomes. Capacity refers to a person's ability to perform a given responsibility.

Any programme on facilitating Lifelong Learning should include all three approaches of pedagogy, andragogy and heutagogy. Blaschke (2012: 60) points out that the heutagogical approach can be viewed as a progression from pedagogy to andragogy to heutagogy, with learners likewise progressing in maturity and autonomy. Based on this premise, Blaschke has offered a framework in the form of a pyramid which reflects the Lifelong Learning process. 'Engagement' indicates participation while 'cultivation' refers to autonomous and self-directed learning. 'Realisation' occurs when capacity is translated into capability.

One of the challenges in Lifelong Learning is operationalizing approaches such as heutagogy. Blaschke (2012: 63) feels that higher education has been reluctant to adopt heutagogy because of the impracticability of implementing it within existing and current educational arrangements. While it is easier to set up systems and processes for pedagogy and andragogy, heutagogy poses considerable difficulties. McAuliffe et al argue that '*the removal of educator makes the concept of heutagogy impractical in a credentialing institution'* (2008).

However, heutagogy has been receiving support from various quarters. According to Blaschke (2012:63) educators in the nursing, engineering and education professions have found heutagogy to be a credible response to the critical issues that the learners are faced with… and have designed their learning environments based on the approach. The University of Western Sydney has implemented the heutagogical approach in its teacher education programme which has resulted in improved teacher outcomes and more capable teachers (Blaschke, 2012). Canning and Callan (2010) have found that the heutagogical approach in three higher education

institutions in the UK have led to reflective learning with learners demonstrating capacity and capability.

Blaschke (2012) suggests that the heutagogical approach could be integrated into formal learning programmes through learner-defined learning contracts, flexible curriculum, learner-directed questions, flexible and negotiated assessments, collaborative learning etc. The learners are not seen as passive recipients of training and education but an active participants who find innovative approaches to solving problems.

Let us now turn to innovations using technology for Lifelong Learning

The integration of pedagogy, andragogy and heutagogy in Lifelong Learning necessitates going beyond the didactic mode of formal education. Information and Communication Technologies are central to making this transition. However, the digital divide continues to be a challenge.

An interesting study in Africa during 2007-2008 shows that a substantial number of people do not know about the internet . The ICT Development Index(IDI) assesses a country's ranking in terms of access, usage and impact. South Africa ranks 97th out of 152 countries showing that there is a clear digital divide.

However in recent times, mobile phones have become an important communication tool in South Africa. As the Slide shows that while fixed broadband is available to only 5 out of every 100 persons, the number of internet users are nearly 50 %. But the penetration rate of mobile phones has been phenomenal at well above 140 %.

While wireless broadband subscribers are growing in South Africa, there is still a disparity between men and women in terms of access to technology.

The increase in mobile telephony provides an opportunity for Lifelong Learning in South Africa. A study shows that the mobile phone networks have started generating employment opportunities for women. Klonner and Nolan (2008) have found that there is a 15 percent increase in employment when a locality receives network coverage. *'A gender-differentiated analysis shows that most of this effect is due to increased employment for women. Household income increases in a pro-poor way when cellular infrastructure is provided'* (Klonner and Nolan, 2008:1).

South Africa has tested the use of mobile phones in formal school education in collaboration with Nokia to improve the performance of students in mathematics. The mobile phones helped the students to learn on their own and through peer-to peer interaction. The project showed *competency in mathematics rose by 14% in all levels.* (Vaanska and Roberts, 2011:5)

Innovation is not just about identifying a new technology. It is more about harnessing the existing technologies appropriately in order to strengthen education and Lifelong Learning. Blaschke (2010) has listed the effectiveness of social media in heutagogy-based Lifelong Learning. Research has found that mobile learning facilitates collaboration, sharing of data and information and leads to reflective practices (Cochrane and Bateman , 2010). Online tools such

as *Virtual Philosopher* through an asynchronous process encourages the learners to evaluate and re-evaluate their learning (Hornsby and Maki, 2008). A study by Blaschke, Porto and Kurtz (2010) observes that active use of social media is helping learners in developing cognitive and metacognitive skills in contrast to passive use which is less effective.

The preceding sections have outlined the theoretical assumptions underlying Lifelong Learning, the range of approaches required to effectively implement Lifelong Learning and the role of ICT in promoting Lifelong Learning opportunities in South Africa. In implementing Lifelong Learning, policy makers and practitioners need to consider how to assess prior learning; how to integrate formal and experiential learning and to provide the flexible approaches that learners need for mobility across the formal, non-formal and informal sectors.

To what extent does the NQF address these needs? How is Lifelong Learning conceptualised in the NQF and where are the gaps? Can the NQF adequately promote Lifelong Learning? What are the paradigmatic changes that need to be made to enhance the NQF's capacity to promote Lifelong Learning in South Africa?

In 2001 a joint ministerial study was commissioned to determine ways in which the gains of the NQF may be consolidated and to chart a course for future progress. One of the major concerns expressed by the stakeholders was the '*lack of recognition of the diversity and complexity of the education, training and skills system which led to the design of a National Qualifications Framework with a "one size fits all" approach*' (Republic of South Africa, 2007). The key recommendation was to simplify the NQF and to improve its efficiency and effectiveness.

As Aitchison (2004:16) puts it:

'*It is fair to say that current policies and practices, in spite of much rhetoric about lifelong learning, are increasingly locking into complicated and heavily structured programmes and qualifications that look remarkably like, those already entrenched in schooling. Although the NQF purports to embody desirable attributes such as relevance, flexibility, access, portability and recognition of prior learning, the actual language by which it is described is complicated, jargon filled and by no means simple*'.

The Lifelong Learning policy seeks to integrate formal, non-formal and informal learning and there is an aspiration that this can be realised through the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). The fundamental problem is that more effort and resources seemed to have been expended on formal and non-formal educational programmes and qualifications without any significant attention being paid to informal learning.

Based on the three types of learning outlined earlier in this paper the NQF seems to be more oriented towards pedagogy and andragogy to the neglect of heutagogy which emphasises self-directed learning, learner autonomy and learning how to learn.

In order to make the NQF more responsive to the diverse learning needs of South Africans there is the need for a paradigm shift from its current emphasis on formal education to recognition of

prior learning, from pedagogy, to andragogy and heutagogy and from sound policies to effective implementation.

What is the way forward?

As you know, next year the current Millennium Development Goals will come to a close. Another set of 'Sustainable Development Goals' will be adopted by the international community. UNESCO's post-2015 education agenda calls for equitable and quality lifelong learning for all by 2030. The earlier goals had emphasised universal primary education. Now the emphasis is shifting to Lifelong Learning for All. And as more countries adopt this approach, there are lessons to be drawn from the South African experience.

We have seen that South Africa has progressive policies for lifelong learning but there is a need to fine tune these policies for more effective implementation. The NQF can be a guidance and facilitation tool rather than a regulatory framework alone. A model which integrates different approaches to teaching and learning can be developed as a concrete example of how formal, non-formal and informal learning can be seamlessly achieved and articulated.

Lifelong Learning requires a convergence of three approaches of pedagogy, andragogy and heutagogy. These are often missing in key instruments such as the NQF. As we have demonstrated, there is a need to review existing pedagogic approaches and to combine these with andragogy and heutagogy to cater to the learning needs of the Lifelong Learner. The teacher-centric institutional model alone will not work. As Lifelong Learning can happen at any time in any place, a learner-centric model will be needed. The teacher becomes a facilitator and the learning happens increasingly through self-direction or peer interaction. Learning becomes more personalised and contextual.

The phenomenal developments in technology and social media have given rise to the collective creation and sharing of knowledge as seen through the Open Education Resources (OER) movement. OER are materials that are free and freely available for all levels of education and training and can be adapted/adopted without having to seek the permission of the original author. As noted earlier, South Africa has a policy on OER. It can now harness the potential of OER to provide a range of learning options to constituencies ranging from young learners to socially marginalised individuals to those in the 'third age'. South Africa has projected 'open learning' as an approach to promote Lifelong Learning. South Africa has deployed open and distance learning for higher education and teacher training. Open learning can be one approach for expanding access to quality Lifelong Learning.

Appropriate uses of technology such as mobiles and community media have resulted in several innovative projects in South Africa. But this innovative use is so far limited to successful pilot projects. What is now needed is to move from small success to sustainable scale and from the formal to the non-formal and informal domains of learning.

It is important to enlarge the circle of stakeholders to determine policies and practices that will address the needs of diverse learners. Innovative models can be promoted through global collaborations and partnerships. The COL Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF) is a

good example of collaborative international development and sharing. These models and good practices from other contexts can be adopted and adapted by a wide range of stakeholders which would include the non-formal and informal learning communities so that the NQF can incorporate their concerns and realities. This will then become an effective tool in promoting Lifelong Learning for achieving the broader development goals of South Africa.

Thank you for your kind attention.