The NQF and its Worlds

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SAQA
PostNet Suite 248
Private Bag X06
WATERKLOOF
0145
Telephone: +27 (0)12 431 5000
Facsimile: +27 (0)12 431 5147
Website: www.saqa.org.za
Helpdesk: 086 010 3188
E-mail: saqainfo@saqa.org.za

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The South African NQF and its worlds: thinking for the future about context, power and contestations in the story of the NQF

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THE STATUS OF THIS DOCUMENT

Although this document was commissioned by the South African Qualifications Authority, it in no way represents officially-endorsed positions or interpretations. The document has been developed within SAQA's established commitment to openness, transparency and critical scrutiny.

Acknowledgements

Four years ago it was frustratingly difficult to find substantial literature on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). A recurring problem in coming to grips with the very idea of the NQF was that most of the literature consisted of advocacy, planning, legislation, regulations, annual reports and guides to practice. There was little resembling a study, although the official commissions on the NQF starting in 2000 provided valuable insights and thinking. But since 2004 there has been a minor explosion of serious investigation of the NQF.

From SAQA itself has come the continuous impact study, which has not only produced substantial reports on each of its stages but has yielded further publications from its two major colloquia. This has been guided by local and overseas advisors, but owes most to the work of Ronel Blom, now of Umalusi, and James Keevy of SAQA.

There have also been no fewer than six doctoral theses on the South African NQF, most published in 2006 and 2007. These are by Stephanie Allais (Wits School of Public and Development Management), Ronel Blom (University of Pretoria), Jeanne Gamble (University of Cape Town – indirectly linked to the NQF but in a sense central), James Keevy (Unisa), Rosemary Lugg (London), and Jeffy Mukora (Edinburgh). These represent many years of theoretical endeavour, and have been the main resources for this study. My engagement with them has been intense and always appreciative, though sometimes conflicted. I have attempted to acknowledge their roles in footnotes, but it is often difficult to separate my own extended experience and reading of the NQF from their analyses. I apologise if there are perceptions and interpretations in this study that are derived from these studies without being specifically acknowledged. This note should be taken as very warm recognition of the work of these writers. A number of major publications from the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) on skills, education and training have helped form my understanding, as have the range of journal articles cited, some of them commenting in illuminating ways on the NQF well before 2004. In addition, the Internet has proved to be a valuable resource for clarification of various issues.

The literature alone could not solve many puzzles about the NQF. Indeed, I am not at all sure that anything has finally solved them for me. But I must acknowledge the many people whose intelligent, often passionate engagement with the idea of the NQF has informed me since I first became involved in it 20 years ago (see the following Writer's Apologia.) However, during this study I have been sustained by conversations with the following valued friends (personal, but also of the NQF – not all of them still good friends of the NQF, though). Some of them also offered extended e-mail contributions or contributed their writings. Melissa King has been a supportive and critical partner in NQF-related matters for some 16 years now, and has been as encouraging and critical a contributor as ever to the writing of this report; Barbara Dale-Jones has been as supportive in this project as she was when we worked together on the NQF Support Link; David Adler is a perpetual source of insights into the shaping of the NQF; Erik Hallendorff, Chris Vorwerk and Meg Pahad have been extraordinarily generous in their inputs. Briefer but invaluable discussions with Jennifer Bisgard, Ione Burke, Richard Jewison, Peliwe Lolwana, Rosemary Lugg (in addition to her thesis), Daryl McLean, Anne Oberholzer, Bryan Phillips (e-mail from afar), Julie Reddy, Gareth Rossiter, Gwyneth Tuchten and Tessa Welch have been of great value. Belated contact with Ron Tuck and John Hart in Scotland has yielded generous new insight into the British origins of NQF thinking. I hope they will all see their influence, but none is responsible for the ideas set out here.

Finally, thanks to the SAQA research team that commissioned this study. The late Ben Parker was extraordinarily patient. I value my fellowship with him and with Ronel Blom (now at Umalusi) and James Keevy.

Preface

In South Africa people from many walks of life are obliged to work with, for or around the NQF. They find themselves drawn in and engaged – whether they sought to be involved or not. Studies that have looked at their views show there is widespread commitment to what the NQF stands for and intends[1]. Commitment is encouraged when those involved see the positive effects, the growth and improvement that come from enacting the NQF – for example, when a company becomes much more conscious, purposeful and systematic about the training needs of its workers than it ever was before, or when a university department gives new levels of focused attention to theory and practice in its curriculum and assessment, or when valuable forms of knowledge are given formal recognition for the first time.

But some features of the NQF lead to puzzlement, alienation, frustration – even fury. There is complexity, cost and contradiction. For every objection one might have to a feature of the NQF, one will find an enthusiast for its value and effectiveness. The tasks of creating the new NQF that was finally approved late in 2007, of keeping the achievements alive within the new structures and correcting the faults, will require as much insight as possible. I therefore dedicate this text to those who love and those who hate the NQF, in the hope that we may all be able to build the proposed new NQF into something we have no reason to hate and much reason to cherish.

[1] The Study Team Report and subsequent reports (DoE/DoL 2002 and 2003), the NQF Impact Study (SAQA 2005) and Blom (2007) show solid commitment to the intent and principles of the NQF while criticising specific features. Even Allais (2007), who has major objections to most of the defining features of the NQF, favours a much lighter framework of communication to serve the ends of the NQF.

The writer's apologia

At the beginning of 2007 SAQA commissioned me to write a study of the contextual factors that have shaped the NQF. This commission led to a year-long engagement with the large body of literature that has recently emerged about and around the NQF. It also led to a considerable amount of reflection on and memories of my own journey with the NQF.

My involvement with the NQF started before we had heard of the idea. In 1988 the HSRC published my short critical evaluation of a major adult literacy programme in the metal industries. Frustration with the vague, unfocused and disempowering structuring of the curriculum led me to suggest that we explore the possibility of some form of needs-based modularity, with clearly marked entry and exit specifications. I also pointed out the need to make better use of the potential for learning within workplace experience, and to the difficulties of doing this. In the same period I was running a series of workshops for literacy activists in which I was trying to moderate simplistic and dogmatic notions of learner-centredness, arguing that it was problematic at many levels to neglect the centres of disciplinary knowledge, pedagogical traditions and practices (the expectations of formal encounters around learning), the identity and needs of the facilitator – not to mention the needs of community, society and economy. I mention this because recent critics of the NQF seem to suggest that learner-centredness and a disciplinary orientation are irreconcilable[2].

Officials from the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) took an interest in my critical evaluation in 1989 and drew me into their initial exploration of the idea of national standards for adult, vocational and workplace education. Since then I have been involved in various ways with the NQF in a role that might perhaps be described as 'participant observer', usually as a dissenting but loyal advocate.

My reflections have also reminded me that the roots of my interest in the NQF go back far earlier than 1988. I mention this here because, in different ways, the roots of our different interests in the NQF mingle in such interesting ways. My own feeling for the NQF has much to do with the passion for educational renewal of the 1960s[3] and with the ironies, failures and achievements of trying to make that renewal work in a conservative school system, and later for many years in the context of the promotion of adult literacy and basic education in South Africa. For various contingent reasons, I found myself specialising in the challenge of using evaluation and assessment to serve the quest for renewal. I came to see assessment as a powerful point of intervention for change – that is, if, emphatically if, it was used judiciously. It is important to note this personal aspect of the study. While I have attempted to distance myself from partisan positions, it is almost certain that I have not succeeded altogether. Readers should therefore be on their guard in this respect – as indeed they should be in approaching virtually any other text about the NQF.

Both the recent literature and the reflection on my experience have proved illuminating. The conflicts within the reflection are painful, sometimes bringing into question very fundamental personal commitments.

The literature on the NQF is also problematic. It ranges from elegant intellectual engagement with conceptual issues and trends to arrays of bureaucratic documentation and pedagogical texts – most of which are rigorously conceived

[2] This position is taken in various ways by Ensor (2003), Muller (2004), Allais (2007) and others. My point demands some category clarification, since learner-centredness and a disciplinary focus are reconcilable if one sees the former as a pedagogical position and the latter as a curriculum concern. (See Section 6.3.2, *World of words, words, words …*)

[3] A wave of fresh progressive educational thinking, mainly from the UK, to a lesser extent from the USA and South America, reached white Anglophone teachers' training colleges in South Africa in the 1960s and 1970s. Despite the stranglehold of Fundamental Pedagogics and Christian National Education on black education, progressive and radical ideas reached across the apartheid divide through alternative education projects, notably the South African Committee for Higher Education (SACHED) and the *World* newspaper's weekend supplement *The People's College*. This promoted progressive approaches and critical thinking. The authorities blamed it for the uprising of 16 June 1976 and in 1977 the newspaper was banned, as were several SACHED leaders including David Adler. Adler became the first Chairperson of the SAQA Board 20 years later.

[4] Foucault (1980). In effect much of Foucault's oeuvre is concerned with exploring issues around this assertion. See also Hoy (1986). Keevy (2005) deals fully with this view in a doctoral study that uses Foucault's thinking to provide a thorough-going framework for analysing the question of power in the NQF.

but confusing in totality. Virtually all the literature illustrates Foucault's understanding of the repressive power of everyday discourse, and especially of academic and bureaucratic discourse[4]. Because of the social demand for the appearance of objectivity and theoretical propriety in the latter, it becomes extremely difficult to understand the interests at play in this literature. The passions that have led supporters and opponents of the NQF to heights of heroic endeavour or to despair and nervous breakdowns are mainly hidden in abstract systemic formulations. One is all too often left wondering what this or that text or tendency really means, what is at stake, why a certain requirement, often not self-evidently necessary, is being insistently implemented – all the more when one cannot really see how it will work.

What is hidden by the discourse is the fact that the NQF is a historic human endeavour, striving for human ends and driven by people – both individually and collectively. Sometimes the passion and commitment glimmer through in moments of inspired rhetoric or suppressed anger. The most honest, though not always the most illuminating, views may be found in the voices quoted in the official reviews and studies of the NQF.

There is something disconcerting in the difficulty of understanding the NQF. The NQF, perhaps more than any institution of post-apartheid South Africa, has been committed to transparency and democratic openness in its pronouncements, texts and practices. To make the NQF available for public participation and critique, every step and process has been debated by stakeholders, made explicit, defined, set out in statements of statutory powers, principles, guidelines, systems organograms, unit standards[5] … the production of clarification has been huge. Yet the endless attempts to formulate and clarify and pin down in words everything that the NQF has anything to do with lead to more and more abstractions and less and less clarity.

We can discern issues of power within the story of the NQF that have dictated the necessity for this faith in formulation. Faith in the efficacy of formulation and specification could be seen as a neglect of the limits of language, chronically overestimating the possibility of transparent definition[6]. But it is very likely that the tendency is not a matter of ignorance. It may well have been the only possible response to very tough dilemmas in the making of post-apartheid South Africa.

As we shall see, it is an oversimplification to say that the NQF is driven by people. It is also driven by various forms of power, by the play of interests and the working of structures and discourses. The relationship between agency (driven with intention) and structure (what is driven by interests, classes, demographic movements and so on) is a chronically difficult question. We can look at the NQF through the unresolved sociological frameworks to understand intention and structure[7]. They help by raising our acceptance of the complexity, but the analysis does not help us very much to understand the particularities. On the whole, as here, it adds abstractions to already thickened layers of abstractions.

These matters are raised in this apologia as a justification for telling the story of the NQF as far as possible in everyday language or in a conversational style. It is a story that concerns the lives of people who control power but are also caught in its cross-currents at a moment in history that, like so many moments, is tough.

I do not wish to overemphasise the explanatory power of local narratives. It is one of the conditions of our freedom, our creative imagination and scientific understanding that we can use words and accounts that are not limited by local contexts. Transformation depends on our capacity to turn complex living experience into manageable simplifications, to manipulate these simplifications in abstract relations and then use the product of the process to shape new worlds. But this power can very easily become corrupted if abstractions not only take on a life of their own, but the demanding responsibilities of recontextualisation[8] in real situations of implementation are treated as though they were trivial. When the logics of disciplines or bureaucratic (un)reason are re-applied to contexts without thought as to how they look or work within that context, their virtues can turn to evils.

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[5] See the partial listing of SAQA Guidelines in the References and Bibliography, and the various regulations and other publications available on www.saqa.org.za or on the linked portal: NQF Gateway.

[6] This assertion is much more fully unpacked in Section 6.3.2, *The world of words, words, words…*

[7] These are characteristic concerns of many sociologists, notably Habermas (1972). The relationship of structure and intention is accessibly handled by Giddens (1984, 1986 and 1990).

[8] 'Recontextualisation' is Bernstein's (1996) term for the work of translating rarefied disciplinary knowledge into discourse or texts for schooling or other contexts.

In this text I do not identify myself in any sense as an official historian, but as a story-teller. The distinction may or may not be fine, but the stories that we tell offer a certain illumination not available to other forms of discourse. One of their virtues is their self-limited authority. They may interlace theories with lives, and take pride in the potential for illumination, but explanation is not really their role. Explanations do indeed feature as characters in the story, with lives of their own – but only in relation to other characters in the story.[9]

Unlike one major form of the discipline of history, stories do not claim to tell what actually happened or 'what was really the case'[10]. Such claims have proved elusive and misleading. Instead, the story aims at creating (preferably honest and scrupulous) pictures that allow others to live a certain experience of what happened and to orient themselves and their decisions and actions in the light of that experience. Writings of the NQF, attempts at scientific explanation or academic accounts elaborately accumulating quotations from different sources aim hard at explanation, but may defeat illumination or become tendentious or trivial.

This is not to say that telling the story of the NQF can be done in a splurge of subjectivity; that would be to misunderstand entirely the discipline of story-telling. In a very real sense we live in fictions, and we and our projects are constructed by fictions – or language or ideology. The more scientific theories we construct are particularly powerful chapters in those fictions. There is nothing frivolous in maintaining this point. It is sustained by various august orientations to human inquiry that avoid theoretical dogma (and are held in low regard in some circles for this reason)[11]. This position is by no means contemptuous of theoretical endeavours.

In order to structure the story of the NQF in terms of the quest to understand the workings of power on, in and through the NQF, I have created a customised and eclectic account of social and cultural power and have reflected this through an attempt to understand the perspectives and the working of power in different 'worlds' that have a direct relationship to, or an indirect bearing on, the NQF.

Having at times doubted various approaches to the commission, I can only hope that the approach I have adopted will be helpful to those with responsibilities in carrying forward the vital mission of the NQF. I do not doubt that insight into the worlds of the NQF and the power in them is essential for anyone needing to go beyond compliance with regulations into real fulfilment of the mission. Whether this study contributes at all worthily to such insight is for others to decide.

Perhaps most important: there are many areas and issues that remain in a state that is little better than conjecture. I have dared to articulate these, not in any great certainty of correctness, but in the hope that the text will stimulate reaction, clarification and correction.

Edward French

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[9] See French (1988) for an extensive argument for the primacy of narrative understandings. The argument was made in a context where the dominance of positivism and empiricism needed to be contested with some extremity. My actual preference is for the more moderate position put here.

[10] The 19th-century German historian Ranke created a school of historiography around this expression. See Carr (1964).

[11] This discussion brings into question whether I am a 'realist' or not. I am resistant to trying to pin down what I believe; perhaps I am too old for it to matter any more. Like a character in JM Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* (Secker & Warburg 2003), I don't know that it is all that important for me 'to believe'. Often it helps to make sense to assume that there is a reality out there independent of our theories or the stories we tell; sometimes it helps not to think that way. I could call myself a pragmatist, but I don't want to because it seems to me that positioning oneself within certainties leads to different forms of self-importance and bullying – the kind of pretension that Derrida (1977) undermined in the deconstruction of the centred subject. My position was influenced by Rorty (1979 and 1989), however, who saw himself in the tradition of pragmatism.

Abbreviations and Acronyms

ABET	Adult Basic Education and Training
ANC	African National Congress
Azapo	Azanian Peoples' Organisation
BCM	Black Consciousness Movement
BUSA	Business Unity South Africa
CBMT	Competency-Based Modular Training
CE	Continuing Education
CEPD	Centre for Education Policy Development
CHE	Council on Higher Education
CNE	Christian National Education
Cosatu	Congress of South African Trade Unions
CUP	Committee of University Principals
DET	Department of Education and Training
DNE	Department of National Education
DoE	Department of Education
DoL	Department of Labour
DOLL	Department of Lifelong Learning
Eskom	Electricity Supply Commission
ETQA	Education and Training Quality Assurance body
FET	Further Education and Training
fqt	family qualification framework
GENFETQA	General and Further Education and Training Quality Assurance Council
GETC	General Education and Training Certificate
GOPP	Goal-Oriented Project Planning
GTZ	German Agency for Technical Cooperation
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HEQC	Higher Education Qualifications Committee
HEQF	Higher Education Qualifications Framework
HSRC	Human Sciences Research Council
IEB	Independent Education Board
ILO	International Labour Organisation
Iscor	South African Iron and Steel Industrial Corporation
ITB	Industry Training Board
JIPSA	Joint Initiative on Priority Skills Acquisition
JMB	Joint Matriculation Board
MDM	Mass Democratic Movement
MOLL	Ministry of Lifelong Learning
NECC	National Education Crisis Committee
NEPI	National Education Policy Initiative
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
NIPR	National Institute for Personnel Research
NLRD	National Learners' Records Database
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
nqf	The informal, sometimes unconscious, qualifications framework that exists in a society
NSDS	National Skills Development Strategy
NTB	National Training Board
NTSI	National Training Strategy Initiative
Numsa	National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa
NVQ	National Vocational Qualifications
OBE	Outcomes-Based Education
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OFO	Organising Framework for Occupations
PAC	Pan-African Congress
pqf	personal qualifications framework
PRP	Participatory Research Programme
QC	Quality Council

QCTO	Quality Council for Trades and Occupations
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
SACHED	South African Committee for Higher Education
SACOB	South African Chamber of Business
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
Sasol	South African Synthetic Oil Limited
SAUVCA	South African University Vice-Chancellors' Association
Scotvec	Scottish Vocational Education Council
SETA	Sector Education and Training Authority
SGB	Standards Generating Body
UCT	University of Cape Town
UDF	United Democratic Front
Unisa	University of South Africa
UP	University of Pretoria
UWC	University of the Western Cape

1. ABOUT THIS STUDY: TAKING A FRESH LOOK AT THE NQF

1.1 Overview, audience and purpose

This section offers background to the origins, scope and orientations of the study.

This study has been written for those who care for the South African National Qualifications Framework (NQF), either because they play operational roles within NQF structures, or because they share the values, principles and intentions of the NQF. It should be relevant to those grappling with change in the NQF. It is directed especially at younger emerging leaders in the NQF who were not involved in its conception, birth pains and youthful traumas. But it may help those who were in the process from the beginning to renew their perspectives on the NQF – among other things, by challenging perspectives set out in this study.

1.2 Aims

There is an overabundance of information about the NQF. It is available in publications by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) that can be rapidly accessed online. Many people whose work is linked in some way to the NQF have undertaken learning programmes offered by the NQF Support Link. The present study is not intended to duplicate or repeat the content of these publications. Its aim is to explore how the NQF came about and to grow in understanding of the contextual factors that impacted on its development. It gives a special focus on the origins of the NQF, and looks at:

- the historical, social and political factors surrounding the NQF
- the personal and professional passions that have moved people to work for the NQF
- the dilemmas and conundrums in the process of developing the NQF
- the achievements and failures of the NQF in its various contexts

1.3 Why more about the NQF?

You may well ask why another publication is necessary. The reason is that most of the readily available information does not get under the skin of the NQF or help one understand the dramatic pressures and tensions in the story of the NQF. The readily available texts properly provide formal rationales and guidelines. In other words, they present the officially sanctioned reasons why an NQF system or procedure is necessary and how it works. In addition, there are numerous documents that are less readily available and that contain academic or specialised arguments about the NQF as a whole or about aspects of the NQF. Many of these are not only relatively difficult to obtain, but speak only to specialists – notably in the arcane discourse of the sociology of knowledge.

But why is it necessary to understand something of the dramatic pressures and tensions in the NQF? There are several answers to this question. The first is that rationales and procedures do not provide the deeper insights that are needed to guide day-to-day judgements[12] and decisions about implementation. This is especially so when major changes are being introduced. When there is fluidity around structures and rules even people in operational roles are faced with decisions that need to be guided by a sense of the underlying history and the ways in which the principles of the NQF have been enacted from moment to moment in that history. In saying this, I am already raising one of the tensions in the NQF. This is the tension between compliance and judgement, between firmly enacting necessary regulatory requirements, and yet not doing so in a way that defeats the very intentions of the regulations.

The need for perspectives on the history and principles – including the contestation around the principles – of the NQF is urgent at present. Cabinet has ratified a plan that will ultimately make massive changes to structures and roles within the NQF. This plan strongly affirms the original intentions and values of the NQF and offers promising ways in which those intentions might be more effectively carried out. But all change inevitably creates new tensions and distresses, even when the transitional arrangements have been as considered as possible. The change becomes much more bearable and manageable with a historical perspective.

The second reason for needing to understand the pressures and tensions in the history of the NQF is closely relat-

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[12] There is frequent confusion in South Africa about the use of the word 'judgement'. As I use it in this study, it means 'decision making', preferably well-informed and wise decision making. It does not mean 'being judgmental' or 'sitting in judgement'. The last two usages are quite rightly seen in a negative light today, especially where there is such sensitivity about the illegitimate exercise of authority in multicultural situations. As I shall argue, one view of the framework in the NQF was that it provided space for the development and exercise of good judgement that would be the very opposite of judgmental, and would contribute to the legitimate, rule-governed and developmental exercise of authority.

ed to the first. It concerns the importance of context. The NQF is driven by principles and values, some of which may be called 'universal'. But it is also driven by politics, economics, beliefs about educational and training practices, and institutional and personal interests. These factors are at play in different ways at international, national and local levels. In a sense, the NQF is driven by deep underlying movements in history. Yet it is also affected by chance and contingency and the utterly unpredictable turbulence that happens in the best plans.

The turbulence is caused by a complex of factors that come together in unforeseeable ways, or when there is a change in the original conditions and assumptions. This is the underlying principle of 'chaos theory'[13]. Far from saying that 'all is chaos', chaos theory is an approach to understanding and to some extent controlling inherently unstable systems. This study might be seen, if you like, as the chaos theory of the NQF, except that it offers only alert and informed insight as a solution to the potential for disintegration and decay.

The third reason concerns being informed by the things that went wrong in the past. The lessons of the past are problematic. If we simply say, 'This worked then, so we will do it again' or 'This failed, so it must inevitably fail and we won't touch it', we are forgetting that the conditions and contexts have changed, and that we cannot escape exercising our judgement in a new way. No science, no body of fixed laws, allows us to escape the burden of judgement and the discipline of exercising informed understanding. This discipline includes being aware of the histories (and the stories) as well as persuasive arguments about principles and practices. Understanding how and why the architects and builders of the NQF decided and acted as they did provides helpful (back)grounding for future decisions and actions but it certainly does not offer the answers. (One of the points that might be drawn from this study is that the NQF may have erred, in its implementation, by believing it could describe competence without accounting for the formative grounds and contexts of competence. In that sense, this study is taking corrective action.)

The way I have expressed myself so far gives the impression that one might have confidence in explaining the multitude of factors touched on in this study. This is a false impression. In writing this set of reflections on the history and genesis of the NQF I am intensely aware of incompleteness of vision and understanding, but also of a sense that this is inevitable.

1.4 Origins and structuring

The study was commissioned by SAQA Research Directorate in response to a comment I made while reporting on a colloquium on the NQF impact study[14]. I suggested we could not make sense of the impact of the NQF by only considering market or client responses to the NQF, but that we needed to look honestly at the political and other contextual factors impacting on the NQF and its implementation. This would be, to use a term used frequently in the 1980s, 'technicist'[15]. SAQA Research Directorate agreed broadly with the observation and asked me to write a study of the contextual factors.

As the study progressed it came to seem important that it be informative and popular in orientation in order to inform those affected by the changes taking place in the structures, roles and practices within the NQF, as well as those responsible for guiding the changes.

The attempt to write a chronological narrative of the NQF, divided according to periods, kept being defeated by the sheer number of contexts and influences that needed to be explained. It was particularly difficult to keep in mind the main question, the working of power. For this reason the study is structured broadly as follows:

- an introductory explanation of the need to look at the working of power in relation to the NQF
- a brief ré sumé of what an NQF is in general and what the NQF is in particular
- an eclectic account of ways of looking at the working of power in relation to our projects and institutions
- an outline of the idea of 'worlds' as a way of mapping the universe of the NQF, modelling the NQF as a solar system (see below)
- the presentation of the working of power in different worlds of the NQF
- a closing set of observations on the effects of multiple worlds of power

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[13] In this study I use scientific metaphors drawn from recent readings in the popular history of science. The general practice is considered more in Section 3 on *The power of worlds within worlds*. In the present instance, my understanding of chaos theory was aided by a broad but basic Web search. Goethe, Emerson, Proust, Lawrence and Mann are just a few of the writers and thinkers who make important use of metaphors from science.

[14] French (2005).

[15] Although the term was used frequently in 1980s critique, its popularity owes a great deal to Buckland (1984).

1.5 A note on the overarching metaphor

The structuring metaphor of a solar system is contrived, but useful in helping the reader to understand the relationship of the parts. It is merely one way of imposing some order on an extremely complex and elusive reality.

The conceptual solar system has the planets revolving around a sun – the Enlightenment impulse at the heart of the NQF. The centripetal force that holds the solar system together is the brief coherent narrative of the story of the NQF – the necessary fiction that keeps the whole together in the imagination. The centrifugal force that keeps the parts distinct and in constant danger of flying apart is the practice of stakeholder participation.

The inner ring of planets is occupied by the four stakeholder groupings built into the original design of the NQF: labour unions, business, state and providers. To this has been added the huge world of people and popular politics, that is very present though not represented directly in the process.

The outer ring of planets, which exert different influences on the centre, consists of a range of institutions and fields of thought and practice. This includes especially a range of theoretical positions and cultural practices, but also the play of personality.

The reader must approach this metaphor with due ideological suspicion. Although it is presented as a mere structuring device, it inevitably creates a coherence and reinforces priorities that may be no more than the product of personal or historical contingencies. But this is the case with any form of ordering and modelling.

2. POWER, CONTEXT AND THE NQF

2.1 Arguments and orientations

The South African NQF was projected, by some of its proponents at least, as a keystone in the arch of the post-apartheid transformation of education and training in South Africa[16]. Another metaphor used was that of the lever or sometimes no more than the fulcrum that would allow for the leveraging of the direction and the momentum of change. For some it was the most elegant and economical solution to the almost intractable legacy – a legacy which, according to some, had left not only the discarded masses, but many university graduates, unfitted for roles in the reconstruction of South Africa. Powerful sectors of South African society found the NQF highly persuasive when it was legislated into being in 1995, even if they differed about aspects of the broad structure. Once this powerful tool for mobilising and shaping change was in place, it was expected that change would be dramatic.

Yet almost before the NQF came into being a process of undermining came into play. Inappropriate institutional location, under-resourcing, absence of sustained political will, divisiveness among stakeholders, attacks or abuse by members of major role-playing agencies all worked against the rapid, smooth and effective implementation of the NQF. Some of those attacking the NQF or withdrawing their supposed support blamed this on emergent structures and practices that they declared unacceptable or unworkable. Others blamed the leadership and management of SAQA[17]. For 10 years, from 1997 to 2007, the NQF had to suffer a situation in that it was waved as a flag of transformation in the highest political circles, while behind-the-scenes support was highly differentiated: intensely loyal in some quarters (where many were still bemused by the shape taken by the NQF in practice), indifferent or grudging in others, and actively hostile in some very powerful places, including the Ministry of Education. The situation tended to bear out Foucault's observation that the exercise of power in reaction to assertions of power multiplies power.

The NQF has survived and is on the verge of what may be renewal, though with some essential features of the original vision compromised or absent. In spite of the undermining the NQF has had a major impact in some of its areas of concern. There has been near-universal buy-in within education and training to its core principles and values, and many new – arguably good – practices have been institutionalised in universities, industrial training centres, adult education centres, schools and colleges because of the NQF.

How might we understand the mixed fortunes of the NQF? In the past four years, as mentioned in the Acknowledgements, major studies of the NQF have been published and since 2000 at least commissions and commentators have offered critical views of the NQF. While I will look into the more detailed questions in the course of this study, it is helpful to distinguish some of the key reasons put forward for the difficulties and shortcomings of the NQF. But first we should remind ourselves what the NQF is.

2.2 What is an NQF?[18]

An NQF is – in the first place – an idea.

The idea is that by deliberately shaping qualifications and their interrelationships at a national level we can contribute to the improvement or better management and recognition of learning in a society. The intention may relate to a highly specific aspect of learning (such as vocational training) or to the most comprehensive promotion of lifelong learning.

Beyond this broad intent, an NQF can take various forms such as:

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16 The image of the keystone in the arch – the single, well-shaped stone at the top of the arch that links both sides and allows the whole structure to stand proud – was the product of a graphic artist designing the covers for the NQF Support Link publications. It was a more ambitious image than the idea of a fulcrum, which I used often in early NQF advocacy (see French 1997b). I faced regular pressure to use a more self-important image. 'Cornerstone' was often used in speeches. It seems likely that officials of the Department of Education (DoE) would have preferred the NQF to be – perhaps – an invisible chemical strengthener in the mortar of education and training (to sustain the architectural metaphor).

17 Criticisms of the theory and practice of the NQF were treated as common knowledge. They are commented on explicitly in Keevy (2005), Lugg (2007) and Allais (2007), and can be clearly read between the lines of the terms of reference of the official investigations (DoE/DoL 2002.)

18 This section draws widely on the official literature, but is customised for the present context. Most NQFs have websites that offer fairly thin accounts of their origins and natures. A very useful recent publication is Tuck (2007).

a) little more than an agreement by some or all providers to be guided nationally (or even internationally) by a set of loosely acknowledged values and principles relating to qualifications, or
b) a set of rules and practices, probably agreeing on ways to describe and compare standards, voluntarily agreed and committed to by participating providers, perhaps only in a particular sector, or
c) a comprehensive set of institutions and regulations that are detailed, prescriptive, systemic and incumbent on all providers offering qualifications in the society.

As a 'framework' an NQF might be expected to be an enabling structure. While it may make use of statutory and regulatory powers, the term 'framework' implies a set of spaces in which different choices or orientations can work together.

The idea of an NQF tends to be expressed in a range of intentions, including
- raising the quality and credibility of the learning reflected in qualifications
- increasing the intelligibility (and thus the comparability) of qualifications and the credits which contribute to qualifications
- improving the justice and fairness of qualifications, especially by attending to the ways in which they affect access and recognition, mobility (transferability) and progression

An NQF could conceivably be designed with no concern for quality or justice, and aim only at administrative efficiency, especially in contexts of high mobility across sectors, systems or national borders. In such situations the comparability of qualifications may be the priority. However, even NQFs that are mainly concerned with administrative rationality (notably regional qualifications frameworks) tend to make some claims to promote quality or justice.

An NQF is a relatively new idea in educational history. The first was formally legislated in 1990 in New Zealand. However, prototypes date from various British institutions established in the 1980s (NVQs, GNVQs, the Scottish Vocational Education Council (Scotvec)). In the 1990s NQFs of very different scope were established mainly in various Commonwealth countries. In the new millennium many more countries in and beyond the Anglophone community have set up or taken an interest in NQFs.

2.3 What is the South African NQF?

The South African NQF is closest to 2.2 (c) above. In other words, it is an idea (incorporating a set of intentions) that
- has the force of law, and is enacted by statutory institutions and regulations
- is comprehensive, affecting all providers who claim to offer qualifications that are nationally recognised
- is prescriptive, detailing many requirements demanding compliance if a provider's qualifications and credits are to be recognised and registered

The South African NQF is especially concerned with the three intentions of the NQF set out in Section 1.2 above (quality/credibility, intelligibility and justice). It is less concerned with administrative rationality, but embraced a strong form of new managerialism[19] in order to service its intentions.

The South African NQF was controversially conceived as an integrated system in that different forms of learning would be granted qualifications of the same level, name and status depending on broad equivalencies of cognitive demand and effort (the notional time required to achieve the level). The aim was parity of esteem regardless of differences in context (notably the contexts of education as opposed to training). In the legislation of 1995 the idea of an integrated system was softened to an integrated approach. From the beginning the ideal of integration, at least in its strong form, has been promoted and disputed with intensity[20].

The key mechanisms used by the NQF – with different degrees of implementation and success – are:
- a system of 10 levels (originally eight), intended to be backed by

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[19] 'New Managerialism' is a term used to describe a world-wide shift in public management over the last 25 years or so, away from a public service orientation with its concerns with care and equity, to the science of business management, with customer and market orientation and a focus on efficiency and delivery. It has tended to decentralise provision while strongly centralising strategic command. A Web search shows the term used widely and negatively by critics of changes in the management of education in many parts of the Commonwealth. Allais (2003 and 2007) argues that such features trap the NQF in contradictions, because of their conflict with aspirations to democracy and equity.

[20] Blom (2007) studies the ideal of integration in the NQF intensively. The ideal is widely espoused, though diversely understood. However, it is strongest as policy symbolism and weak in overall implementation. Nonetheless, Blom perceives signs that it is working well within certain fields of learning such as health, where interchanges within the sector allow for greater comparability and potential progression across

- generic level descriptors (limited and problematic in reality and scarcely used as yet)
- exit outcomes for key levels (completion of general and further education and different certificate, diploma and degree levels)
- standard setting aimed at specifying outcomes and assessment criteria using strictly prescribed unit standard formats
- quality assurance, including accreditation of providers, the improvement of assessment practices and the registration of assessors
- maintenance of national records of individual learning achievements
- the recognition of prior learning (RPL) whereby individuals may gain recognition for experiential learning that satisfies appropriate national standards, regardless of the mode of acquisition

These mechanisms are sustained in different ways by a range of semi-autonomous bodies under the Ministries of Education and Labour. Oversight and leadership are provided by SAQA. In a recently approved dispensation, three separate quality councils (QCs) handle qualifications in

- higher education (the Higher Education Quality Council, or HEQC)
- general and further education (Umalusi)
- trades and occupations (the Qualifications Council for Trades and Occupations, or QCTO)

In addition, standards and quality assurance have been the responsibility of 23 Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs).

The jurisdiction of the various bodies responsible for implementing the NQF is confused and disputed, possibly because of faulty drafting of legislation in which sectoral and institutional powerplay had a hand, and various initiatives to restructure and clarify the system are in place at the time of writing.[21]

Legislation to establish the South African NQF was passed in 1995, while initial operations date back to 1997.

However, the idea of a rationalised system articulating education and training qualifications was mooted in attempts to reform apartheid education and training through the 1980s[22]. Between 1989 and 1994 these were challenged, taken up in some ways, and refined by the productive sector (mainly the trade union movement, with the blessing of and constructive inputs from business), gradually taking over leadership of the state's policy initiatives and at times in an uneasy alliance with the business sector. During that period the original concepts expanded dramatically. Originally narrowly concerned with the standing of technical and vocational training (including the declining institution of apprenticeships), and to a lesser extent with adult education in industry, they grew into an ambitious plan for exercising leverage over all officially recognised learning in South Africa.

Because of the NQF, new systems of accreditation and quality assurance were adopted and implemented in varying forms throughout schooling, higher education and industrial training between 1997 and 2007. The impact is wide-ranging – though not always seen as positive – with major increases in systematic participation in matters relating to curriculum, assessment and certification[23]. In the previous system the design and planning of formal learning in South Africa had been incoherent and totally lacking in transparency and democracy.

However, many mechanisms of the NQF have not worked well and have been disputed, sometimes angrily. Wide-ranging projects have been undertaken for the generation and registration of large numbers of unit standards, but these have only been adopted in some areas of the productive sector. They are used scarcely, if at all, in institutional education and training. The improvement of assessment practices and the credibility and comparability of many credits have been disappointing. Level descriptors, RPL and the national records of achievement have as yet proved difficult to implement fully and have yet to prove themselves[24]. On the other hand, public and professional awareness of the power and implications of curriculum, assessment and certification practices has probably increased con-

[21] The confusion of powers in the legislation is unpacked in Umalusi (2003).

[22] The origins of aspects of the NQF in some reformist policy intentions in the 1980s are lucidly explained by Kraak (2004). The issue is a major concern in Mukora (2006).

[23] Hundreds of Standards Generating Bodies (SGBs) were run in the earlier part of the period. The urgent need to streamline production of standards (lack of which was holding up other developments) led to SETAs and SAQA increasingly taking over the role of creating standards. The emphasis moved to some extent to the use of specialised consultants. Nonetheless, SGBs, together with extensive training demanded by the need to work in terms of the NQF, have considerably widened direct participation in these matters. The participation is largely but not entirely within the productive sector, and the quality and value of the participation is uneven, but it remains an advance on the opaque curriculum processes of the past. (This point is strongly made by Vorwerk (personal communication). Other occasional participants in the process speak highly of the thoughtfulness that it generates regarding learning.

siderably, though from an extremely low base.

The NQF is at the start of a process of restructuring after long-awaited Cabinet approval of an approach recommended in the early 2000s. This essentially requires abandoning the project of integration. In its place there will be the three separate QCs listed above, relating in ways as yet unclear to the national qualifications authority (SAQA), that has been termed the 'apex organisation'. The three QCs will ostensibly be 'interdependent', though how this will work, and how it will be better than the incoherent system of former times, remains to be seen.

2.4 Emergent critiques of the South African NQF[25]

The various commissions and studies of the NQF have produced critical observations that may be summarised and grouped as follows:

- *The NQF is conceptually flawed from the beginning*

Various fundamental assumptions are held to be ill-conceived. For example: the qualifications system cannot be a driver of transformation; the concept of lifelong learning and the idea of integrating education and training are problematic; the underlying (post-Fordist) notion that the workplace is becoming friendly to flexible knowledgeability is questionable in the developing world; an approach based on competency, standards or outcomes is contradictory to the very nature of knowledge (and even some forms of skill); knowledge, skill and values are so distinct that it is mischievous to conflate them; everyday or experiential knowledge is all very well, but it is not suitable for recognition in qualifications; aspects of constructivism and post-modern relativism that can be found in the NQF are mischievous; the idea that anyone outside Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) has a right to participate in saying what constitutes certifiable knowledge is intolerable.

- *The NQF is politically suspect*

Observations include: the need for something like an NQF was suggested by reformist planners in the late apartheid era – the NQF is therefore an apartheid project; the NQF is a product of the neo-liberal determination to remove the responsibility for social action from the state and put it in the hands of global capital; linked to this, the NQF is a response – or even a capitulation – to pressures of the globalised mobility of capital (including human capital); the NQF was hijacked by proponents of a centralised command approach to development and is so constructed that it defeats the best features of neo-liberalism; the NQF is the result of unresolved and largely unacknowledged conflicts in the Struggle that were papered over because of the necessity for unity – it represents the temporary triumph of one segment of the resistance to apartheid education and training; progressive educational thinking implicit in much of the NQF actually locks the poor and marginalised into their situations.

- *The model of the South African NQF is unworkable*

For example: the NQF is too ambitious – the idea that an NQF can be the major or sole instrument for transforming learning (and even the nature of the society) is grossly unrealistic; the resultant attempt to be both comprehensive and prescriptive is a formula for failure; the implicit expectation of policy breadth and coherence – supporting policies and practices by multiple state and productive sector organisations – is unrealistic in a country like South Africa; unresolved tensions between the identities of 'developmental agency' and 'regulatory authority' lead to a curiously unsatisfactory mix of practices; the salience of stakeholder participation is a recipe for trouble; the detailed, pre-emptive, untested planning of standards and quality assurance practices required by the design must lead to the imposition of complex, labyrinthine procedures on providers.

- *The implementation of the NQF is unsatisfactory*

For example: there has been a sustained, unpredictable play of power at all levels in and around the NQF; some fundamental assumptions around the successful implementation of the NQF were disappointed, most notably the puzzling continuation in the new era of the two competing apartheid empires of Manpower (Labour) and Education

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[24] Umalusi (2007) shows how inadequately the specification in standards supports comparability, at least in respect of general or academic learning. Level descriptors are inherently problematic. (See later discussion of problems of definition and the reference to ostensive definition in Section 6.3.2, *The world of words, words, words …*). For a broader view, see Soudien (2006).

[25] Most of these critiques are richly present in the Study Team Reports (DoE/DoL 2002), as is support. In various forms, these critiques can be found in Allais (2003 and 2007), Ensor (2003), Gamble (2004), Muller (2004), Young (2003b) and others. Raffe (2005) and Blom (2007) raise special concerns around the problem of comprehensiveness and prescriptiveness.

– the relationship between the two government departments and even their respective Ministers is referred to as a 'turf war'; a raft of legislation that suggests that the drafters did not apply their minds gave overlapping authority for the NQF to different agencies; the management of the complex relationship between stakeholders, experts, users, competing institutions and sectors required damaging compromises to the integrity of key features of the NQF; many providers find procedures complex, rigid and expensive; the NQF is too sophisticated and complex for implementation given the limitations of competence or capacity created by apartheid education and poverty.

It should be clear, even at first sight, that some of the reasons are less plausible than others. Many are partly true. Collectively they seem to raise the questions: How could an idea with such apparently poor intellectual, political and practical credentials be elevated to the status of the blueprint for a new learning society? And why, once it had been established as such a blueprint, did it fail to become the dominant guiding discourse in education and training in South Africa? To use the question of one of the most astute students of the NQF: 'Why did the NQF fail to become hegemonic?'[26]

While framing the question, it should be remembered that the NQF was designed and bought into over some five years of the most intense ferment of policy development that involved the country's elite in education and training, highly respected international advisers and numerous stakeholder groupings. This is not to say that there was consensus about the need for an NQF, or about its prominence or its design. Nonetheless, there was what was termed 'sufficient consensus', against a background that offered no immediate or specific alternatives, for legislation to pass smoothly through Parliament.

As with many other situations in post-apartheid South Africa, in which world-beating policy has not been reflected in performance, the answers to the puzzling questions about the destiny of the NQF are extremely complicated. The various studies of the NQF are all, of necessity, committed to a sectoral view or a particular analytical position. Inevitably, they illuminate aspects of the questions and yet scarcely relieve the broader puzzlement.

This limited study offers a series of accounts that point to what a comprehensive study of the play of power and contextual influences on the NQF might look like. This draws with respect and gratitude on the impressive efforts mentioned above. It adds to them only in the way that a different framing enables one to see things differently – and in this case, to see a variety of perspectives at once.

The approach adopted is pluralistic and eclectic, both in its attempt to bring the multiple 'worlds' of the NQF into the picture, and in its understanding of power and influence. It might be more academically satisfactory to use the scalpel of a single disciplinary approach, although there are problems with the deliberately selective gaze. The pluralism is made necessary in the particular study, however, by two features of the NQF already touched on. Firstly, the ambition, the all-embracing comprehensiveness of the NQF means that it is necessarily complex. Its client base is extremely wide-ranging and differentiated. (To its critics it might be seen as Hydra-headed, with each head needing to be dealt with in its own character.) Secondly, the NQF has been developed with much attention to stakeholder participation and ownership. Both of these features mean that the contexts and the play of power involve an incalculable array of interests, energies, discourse positions and enmities.

[26] This is the key question underlying Lugg's (2007) illuminating study of the politics of the NQF's establishment. In analysing the fluctuating fortunes of the NQF, Lugg uses Laclau & Mouffe's (1985) theory of social action. This emphasises the role of discourse in cementing or rupturing alliances.

3. THE POWER OF WORLDS WITHIN WORLDS OF THE NQF

3.1 Overview

The following section should be seen as both methodological and substantive. It creates the basis for an understanding of power that structures the study as a whole. It also touches on issues and terminology that are required for understanding the arguments in and around, and for and against, the NQF. It does not aim at a coherent theory of power and experienced worlds, but at setting up a number of frames of reference for a discussion of the NQF.

3.2 Forms of power: powerplay, the exercise of power and the play of power

Even in physics, energy and power elude final explanation in spite of the impressive progress made in understanding them. A blend of learning, mathematical brilliance and profound imagination is required to understand these concepts. In human affairs, energy and power are made yet more elusive by the addition of will, intention and purpose. Physics, for example, can explain every process that goes into making a ceramic teapot and that allows it to keep its form for a time, but cannot make sense of the complex of signs – cultural, historical, aesthetic – that constitute its intentionality, social purposes (or even the powerplay that it may generate in a contest of host(esse)s)[27]. In a social context it is the meaning and symbolism of the teapot (or of any artefact or practice) that gives it power to be and influence, not its elemental structure. Power in and around the NQF is directed at and through perceptions, practices, uses, position – and the understanding of how the NQF impacts on, threatens or nurtures other practices, uses and so on.

An additional and very serious complexity that makes it difficult to understand power in human affairs is brought about by globalisation. It is difficult enough at times to locate and make sense of the working of power in a family, a small community or a nation. It is probably impossible to approach an understanding of the sources and flows of the power of international capital, commerce, and communication and information technology – plus the intentions and desires that they express – as they reach into the dwelling spaces and intimacies of most modern individuals.

Attempting to understand what gives energy to a large human project with some international dimensions like the NQF and how the powers that direct, shape and limit its destiny work is fated to be no more than an attempt. As I have already suggested, simply telling the story of the NQF with sufficient richness would begin to throw light on the issue. But various dilemmas interpose themselves. There is what seems to be an irreducible complexity – for the reasons touched on above – which means that the narrative must fall into great tedium if it goes into every moment in which energy is generated and power is directed or frustrated. A dismissively contemptuous remark by an academic on the SAQA Board might kill a whole new direction; a failure of implementation in a particular factory because of some contingency – the absence on sick leave of a key training officer, say – might put paid to a substantial investment in a learnership. The negativity often ricochets through the sectors concerned.

But there is also the awareness that even in the simplest narrative there is an exercise of power in the selection. This is a phenomenon of such inevitability that it has defeated the most serious intentions of historians to tell ‘what actually was the case’. In the end, reluctantly, we must try to unpack our interpretive frames. This is, by the way, a necessity even in physics, where the value of the total energy of a system depends on the frame of reference (the point of view from which it is seen to act within its contexts), even though the energy does not change with time.

Power is obviously fundamental to change, and it is important that we attempt to make sense of its working. Reflections on power seem to fall into three fundamentally different ways of thinking of power and the influence of context in human affairs, each of which need to be taken into account when trying to understand the NQF. These could be understood as *powerplay*, *the exercise of power* and *the play of power*.

[27] Ellis (2005) uses this example. Ellis has a distinguished record as a mathematician/physicist who celebrates the extraordinary power of physics (whether applied to the cosmos or the working of the brain) while pointing to the limits of what physics can explain.

The first, *powerplay*, involves the art of manipulation, of playing games with others, individually or collectively, to produce certain desired effects for good or ill. This is elevated to its greatest finesse in the writings of Machiavelli[28], whose psychological insights draw on experience of turbulent times, and on a remarkable blend of intuition and practical analysis. The rules of powerplay include tricks and sleight of hand. However, powerplay makes use of the many modalities of power at play in a situation. It may play (often cynically) on traditional or delegated authority, class or group position, personal charisma, expertise, persuasion, financial influence, and the threat of violence or direct coercion. The list could be extended.

As we shall see, powerplay can have a positive, if questionable, moral dimension, but it can be undertaken purely in the interests of power. The worst Machiavellian villains have been seen as driven by 'motiveless malice'. It is naï ve to neglect this dimension of power. Perhaps the most frequent negative examples of powerplay in the NQF have been seen in situations where there is weak political leadership or a lack of political will. The experience of a number of SETA Boards, for example, shows situations where weak chairing allows the representatives of one sector or interest group to gang up on the proponents of a project in the interests of asserting their power (perhaps against a sense of impotence or exclusion) in ways that merely destroy any progress.[29] On the other hand, canny moves, entertaining the right people to lunch in the right place and knowing the right things to say, may be essential to secure the funding for a really worthwhile project. These matters are not made public, of course, and are difficult to substantiate.

The *exercise of power* relates to the material organising structures of power – political, institutional (bureaucratic, legal, cultural/educational, religious) and coercive (military, police). Although these are most readily associated with the state, it is possible to argue that the flourishing disciplines and lore of business management show how corporations and financial institutions have become direct wielders of power which has procedural legitimacy, if not democratic legitimacy. (In other words, it follows public rules, if not being subject to the broader democratic process.) For the most part, the exercise of power is justified by notions like legitimacy based on tradition or rationality, but it can also be used illegitimately. In democracy the exercise of power is required from time to time to prove its legitimacy.[30]

Power seen in this way is always backed by the availability of legitimised violence. It may also use structural violence. (There can be little doubt that someone struggling through the labyrinth of registering a learnership or a qualification on the NQF will regard this as an encounter with structural violence.) But the exercise of power works mainly through persuasion, linked to the ability to confer or withhold favours or benefits such as the granting or refusal of a certificate. It is also dependent on the less easily-applied, less conscious forms of power discussed below.

In the term *the play of power*, the word 'play' is close to our usage when we think of electric energy playing through a cumulus cloud, sometimes unseen, sometimes illuminating the cloud, sometimes flashing out as lightning. In a more human sense, the play of power may be experienced in a gathering stirred by a gifted speaker, where the power is almost felt to ripple through the gathering, and where people afterwards say that they found it energising and either take a new course of action or put more focus and effort into their present course of action. In philosophical terminology, we might talk of the ontology of power (while accounts of the previous two forms of power would constitute a phenomenology of power). However, this terminology is regarded as tainted with metaphysics in certain schools and needs to be used with caution.

Seen at a more theoretical level, the play of power is about how resources and energy are generated, stored, shaped and directed by a multitude of processes and mechanisms. These processes are often hidden from common sense, or are unconscious. In a religious context they may be seen as the working of 'the spirit'. In dialectical materialism they are seen as manifestations of the ways in which certain groups control the sources and goods of life (or 'own the means of production'). Counter-theories have focused on an almost mystical 'will to power' or on 'the world as will and idea'. Sustained attempts have been made to understand the hidden mechanisms of power, especially for

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[28] Machiavelli (1999), writing around in 1513, sets out a boldly instrumental view of the art of government. He looks, for example, with brutal frankness at decisions about using cruelty as an instrument of policy. His writings lie behind the behaviour of the ruthless offspring of King Lear and, most famously, of Iago in *Othello*. It may be disputed whether Machiavelli is immoral, amoral, or has a special code of a certain kind of realistic manly virtue.

[29] The powerplay in SETA Boards has not only affected work the writer has been involved in in three SETAs, but has been relayed by SETA executives and other consultants working with the SETAs. In several cases there have been vivid failures of chairing, where business management and labour leadership played off against one another. (There are also many examples of successful agreement.)

[30] The exercise of power and the machinery of government are analysed by numerous students of politics and law. Galbraith (1983) has had interesting things to say about the agencies and exercise of power. Apart from Machiavelli, Hobbes (1962) is an essential classic on power.

securing consent and even active participation with minimal use of the threat of violence. These have included theories of ideology and interests, and theories that see power working through codes (structuring tacit social practices – of cultural assumptions, of structures of knowledge or the grammar of disciplines, or of language).[31]

Groping for understanding by resorting to metaphors from more material disciplines has a long history, and has already been exemplified in this study. The idea of individual and social power seems always to have been mediated by metaphors drawing on currently dominant science and technology. In the early enlightenment the characteristic image was of clockwork, the explanatory discipline geometry. (The problem with the clockwork metaphor was that it posed the questions of who designed the clock, who wound the spring and so on.) The mechanical universe saw power and knowledge in terms of predictable and measurable actions and reactions. The image was capable of great complexity and subtlety and was to endure into the still-current school of behaviourism, with its core idea of power playing through stimulus-response mechanisms (a mode of analysis that is still useful in clearly circumscribed contexts).

The 18th century drew richly on growing, sometimes supremely persuasive, insights into personal and cognitive development. The infant, struggling to locate and assert itself against otherness, is shaped by its confrontation with the world, but, as it grows into adulthood and creativity, it also becomes an object to others and shapes and changes the world. This image underlies the dynamic idea of the dialectic as a model for the play of power and knowledge through history and society. In the 19th century the idea of natural selection became a popular model for understanding power – a model that very strikingly helped to generate and guide some horrific uses of power through imperialist and racist policies. In more recent times computer science (programming), molecular biology (the working of DNA – information – in cells), quantum mechanics, cosmology and ecology have provided potent metaphors for understanding power and knowledge that are far more complex than clockwork.

Perhaps the most pervasive metaphors in theories of power and knowledge in recent times have been based on linguistics. The sub-disciplines of grammar (the underlying rules that ‘generate’ utterances), pragmatics (the study of how we make sense of one another) and phonetics (the structure of ‘signs’) have all been taken up by thinkers interested in power, how it relates to knowledge, and the generative capabilities and limits of both. These theories have been broadly concerned with how discourse shapes identities and contexts, predisposing groups and individuals to act in certain ways, support certain movements, remain passive in the face of various phenomena. Discourse, which includes codes, knowledge, practices and signs, is seen as generating power and knowledge through the construction of identities and contexts.

Any individual and group can be a subject and an agent of power. Recently there has been a movement to revitalise the idea of community or fraternity as a source of power and freedom[32]. The isolation of the individual as freely-choosing consumer in global markets is seen as disempowering, making inroads into identity and real freedom. Religious communities and their counter-cultural values (that is, in relation to the ‘free’ market and its relativist ideology) are seen as sources of power. There is even some concern to reinstate the smaller nation – after the justified reaction against the excesses of nationalism in the 20th century – as a source of individual identity and power.

Relating this ‘ontological’ notion of power to the NQF is extremely difficult. Attempts to link the fortunes of the NQF to structural notions are not entirely convincing. It is one thing to show that certain discourses, structures or movements existed at the same time as the NQF, or share certain surface features with the NQF, and another thing to demonstrate satisfactorily that they vaguely explain the NQF, and even less that they are necessary and sufficient conditions for predicting the rise and fall of the NQF. This is an enduring problem. On the whole the deeper structures (or post-structures) can only be judged, aesthetically perhaps, by the extent to which they illuminate in a pleasing way.

In spite of the difficulties, there are opportunities along the way in the portrayal of worlds in this study where one might point to underlying sources of power or power leakage. One observation emerging from the study is that the NQF has probably never tapped into the power of the popular imagination or to any gut sense of political necessity in South Africa. The NQF is to some extent counter-intuitive in terms of popular input and transmission-focused understandings of education and training. Nor did it ever totally convince as responding to underlying interests. This

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31 The underlying play of power has been a major theme in Western thought at least since Vico. It might be seen as falling into two traditions of analysis, one Hegelian, the other Nietzschean, with some confluence of the two in post-modernism. In the last 50 years the field has been dominated by French thinkers including (with very different perspectives) Althusser, Foucault, Derrida, Baudrillard and Lyotard.

32 For a range of emerging literature looking at community and fraternity in this way see Nairn (2007).

does not mean that it is therefore somehow wrong. Important policy tools like VAT, for example, or for that matter the entire system of taxation, will never be popular, yet are important and sustainable. (The taxation system does, however, link to the power of capital, political authority and national bureaucracy in a way that the NQF cannot do.) But to prove this point is impossible. There can only be an intuitive leap between the evidence and the conclusions.

All three ways of looking at power – powerplay, the exercise of power and the play of power – seem from one perspective to be unrelated. From the point of view of the profounder ontologies that try to map the underlying structures of the play of power, the other two forms of understanding may look trivial or obvious. From the point of view of powerplay the second pair may seem to be fooled by an ultimately naï ve faith in the possibilities of rational explanation against the 'brute realities' of power. From the point of view of the exercise of power, powerplay may seem to be a diseased form of power, while the play of power seems fanciful, if not fairly inaccessible, and not very helpful.

However, the three perspectives could be seen as playing different but interlinked roles in understanding power. In spite of the reservation about proving connections set out above, the way that power plays through human communities in discourse and ideology, cultures and histories seems to help explain why, for example, Machiavellian tyrants or legitimate bureaucracies manage to hold sway over vast numbers of people, usually with very economical applications of coercion. The workings of the (legitimate) exercise of power through institutions and structures may be more helpful than discourse theory or powerplay in explaining why certain decisions were taken, why specific actions failed to happen and so on.

3.3 The flow of power

Energy may be indestructible, but it can build up, be stored, concentrated, magnified and directed. Inasmuch as it is managed, concentrated, directed, focused, conducted and used to an end, it is power. It can also degenerate, be expended in transmission, leak or be short-circuited.

This electrical metaphor belongs in a Newtonian universe of mechanical predictability.[33] As a model for political, social and cultural power it belongs mainly with the *exercise of power* and might be seen as 'managerialist'. In the universe of quantum mechanics, power draws on scarcely knowable sources of energy, while the flow of power is subject to fundamental uncertainty and relativity. This does not mean that these are necessarily unpredictable, but they are so complex they might only notionally be understood in the real world by a form of chaos theory. Chaos theory tries to make sense of structures that are destabilised when sometimes minor contextual or design assumptions change. *Powerplay* and *the play of power* are better understood in metaphors drawn from quantum mechanics than from Newtonian principles. One of the reasons for this is that power in society is conducted and channelled by power elites. Nearly all of the worlds considered below are dominated by relatively small elites. It is in the elites that power plays and is played, to be disseminated in the generality (where it might be seen to be stored or lost.)

In complex systems the flow of power is particularly subject to the problem of time and place. The right idea at the wrong moment, or at the right moment but in the wrong place, can lead to total loss of power in projects that seem to have everything going for them. But different worlds also have their own understandings of time and time scales (a magic wardrobe may be needed to pass from one time world to another)[34]. To some extent, the art of powerplay at its best consists of manipulating power in the right place at the right time. The factors are so complex that this may be a subject where what works best is inexplicable political intuition.

The relevance of these two models (Newtonian and post-Newtonian) for the NQF is for the most part background for the study. However, one might argue that the NQF draws on a vision that is essentially part of the quantum era – it sets out to understand, embrace and link multiple sources of energy coming unpredictably from different directions (knowledge/power). At the same time, though, it participates in contexts in which mechanistic, linear and managerial models predominate (without necessarily working well). The result should be a shift in popular and political understanding toward the more adequate model. Given the power of embedded social institutions and the difficulty

[33] Newton's laws enabled a huge increase in our power over nature. They remain totally relevant for many of our undertakings. Designing and building a bridge is mostly informed by Newtonian calculations. However, understanding the behaviour of molecules in the materials used in the bridge, or extreme conditions, might better be informed by physics after Einstein (see relevant discussions in, for example, Gribbin (2002) and Singh (2004)). The comprehensiveness of the NQF has demanded a difficult ability to invoke different paradigms on the part of its managers and its critics. This may be too much to expect of a bureaucratic structure.

[34] CS Lewis's popular *Narnia* stories, from which this example is taken, bear witness to an imagination of time and different dimensions and of being deeply informed by his immersion in medieval and renaissance literature and early Christian mysticism, as in Lewis (1936).

of change, the result is more likely to be an inescapable lack of fit between vision, design and action that exacerbates the normal leakage and wastage through transmission. The extent to which SAQA has succeeded in sustaining at least some important features of the NQF in national life must, in the light of this view, be seen as impressive.

3.4 Worlds of power

The different dimensions of power are invoked in our striving to understand power and context in the NQF. Some attempt is made to see the broad operation of power in a general narrative of the NQF. However, this is inescapably schematic. It is more revealing to look at the NQF in terms of the working of power in the worlds within worlds that the NQF grows out of, inhabits, invades. The reason for this is that powerplay, the exercise of power and the play of power function differently in each of the worlds of the NQF.

It is important to consider briefly the idea of 'a world'. As we saw above, even the physics of energy must take account of the 'frame of reference'. 'A world' is shorthand for a frame of reference – or rather for clusters of frames of reference within notional communities.

Everyday language refers frequently to 'the world of … science, music, ideas, drag racing, fashion, the ANC, Nelson Mandela …' and so on. The idea of a 'world' was given special dignity in the philosophical school called Phenomenology. There the *Lebenswelt* or life-world was seen as the experienced space that creates the conditions of possibility for perceptions and for making sense of perceptions, and that frames and limits the horizons of an individual's or a community's perceptions.

As the use of 'world' is a key framing device in the present study, it is important to point out its lack of innocence. It is part of a shaping discourse. It encourages the user to forget that it is a metaphor, and to attribute an actuality to the particular 'world' as though it were a legal person with a distinct will and even rights of its own. The usage might embody and forward particular orientations that favour certain forms of power. It might point us in the direction of adopting identities that affirm the reality of narrow communities of values or coercively coherent structures, for example, or may support a pluralistic and liberal interpretation of the world that masks the play of power through a subtle commitment to controlling through dividing and ruling.

Since any frame of reference similarly lacks innocence, this is not a disabling criticism, but demands awareness and correction in the course of implementation.

One essential correction is to avoid seeing the worlds of the NQF as hermetically sealed. On the contrary, they overlap and different forms of power move, often chaotically, from one world to another. In addition, each world is both subject to power and an agent of power. The analogy of ecology may be helpful here, where complex systems support certain forms of life and may at times allow them to flourish, but are never permanently stable, and interact (sometimes violently and destructively) with other ecologies. At the end of this study, after looking at the dynamics of power in the overall narrative and in each of the identified worlds, I will look at some of the effects of this movement of power from one world to the other.

Each of the worlds just listed is made up of further worlds within worlds. Each sub-discipline in the world of science is a world of its own. But there are other dimensions of the world of science that make up other worlds in their own right: for example, one might talk of 'the world of scientific reasoning' that would cross disciplinary boundaries. Some worlds have the relative solidity of actual institutions; others are notional worlds, made up of concepts, principles and practices that may have their being and their own forms of power beyond actual communities. In each of these worlds one will find powerplay, the exercise of power and the play of power in unique forms, degrees and combinations.

3.5 A note on the valuing of power

It is tempting to view power as evil. Power is popularly seen as abused and abusive, while historical figures linked most vividly with power are often monsters.

In this study, on the contrary, power is viewed as a fundamental good. It is the source of life and must be abundantly present in our projects if we hope for their success. Among other things, power can be seen to generate know-

[35] Foucault (1980) warns against a moralistic negativity about power, seeing it as generative (and generated by language). It might be better to say that power IS, rather than that it is a good. But in a certain way of thinking these mean the same thing.

ledge – and to be generated by knowledge. Power can, of course, be seen as value-neutral and it can be used wrongfully, but these points do not undermine its value or its necessity.[35]

Powerplay is inseparable from manipulation of others or treating people as means to ends, and is therefore, from a certain ethical point of view, necessarily to be condemned. However, we have seen some positive uses of powerplay, and a pragmatist might be tempted to recognise that powerplay is inevitable in any collective human context, and that it is best that it be recognised and encouraged to work for a general good.

3.6 Locating the worlds of the NQF

Given the potential for the fragmentation of worlds, it seems possible to generate an infinite number of possible worlds. It is important, therefore, to make a careful selection of the worlds of the NQF. Throughout, it is important to recognise that these are heuristic structures, that they lack any objective reality. They are worlds tied together by notional bonds but having real effects of power (in the same spirit as the quip about Hegel – that 'he produced real rabbits out of metaphysical hats'.[36]) Long reflection has yielded the list set out in the table of contents. But it is only one among many possible sets.

As will be seen in the course of the exploration, some of the worlds are relatively cohesive, others fragment immediately on inspection.

[36] I have forgotten the source of this aphorism, but suspect it was Isaiah Berlin.

4. THE SOLAR SYSTEM OF THE NQF

4.1 Fundamental forces

The solar system is kept in temporary dynamic stability because of a temporary balance of centripetal and centrifugal forces. The former pulls it to the centre; the latter drives it away from the centre. Here the metaphor of the solar system is used to locate two aspects of the NQF: the canonical narrative (or the standard approved tale of the NQF), and the institution (or phenomenon) of stakeholder representation.

4.1.1 The centripetal force of the canonical narrative

There is a reasonably standard pattern to the basic story of the NQF. It holds things together, keeps them in orbits – albeit wobbly orbits – and might be seen as a necessary fiction, though constructed of facts.

In 1988-89 Cosatu, South Africa's leading trade union federation, initiated a process of policy development for the education and training of workers. They undertook this in consultation with their membership and with fraternal organisations in the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM). Their first concern was to serve the interests of workers by improving their tradable skills in the bargaining forums for better conditions of service.

This effort faced many challenges. The legacy of extremely poor apartheid education was exacerbated by South Africa's even worse record of technical and vocational training. State provision, including the declining institution of apprenticeships, had only recently been extended to people other than whites. The broadened provision resulting from reformist moves in the apartheid state was unsatisfactory and ineffectual. In addition, the MDM's strategic priority was to undermine the legitimacy of the apartheid regime, which required sustained nonengagement or contestation, even with ostensibly positive developments.

Provision of training and human resources development by the private sector was thin, piecemeal and often grudging. Even relatively substantial efforts at promoting adult literacy and basic education in industry had had little success; these tended to be offered as charity. Without an adequate statutory framework of curriculum and incentives or penalties for provision, it seemed unlikely that the private sector would act with the same energy in this domain that it gave to generating profit or pleasing its shareholders. On the whole, the private sector argued that they paid substantial taxes and that education and training were the state's direct responsibility. Inasmuch as skills were developed, this tended to be done by the large parastatals (Eskom, Iscor and Sasol) or by the huge mining corporations. Smaller businesses and industries then 'harvested' the skilled workers, without investing in training themselves.

Two pressures were clear to Cosatu in this situation. The first was that the private sector had to be obliged to engage in skills development. This was because of apparently inexorable trends in the increasingly globalised economy. The fall of the Soviet Union, China's emerging success as a free-market economy and the general triumph of neo-liberal capitalism seemed to allow no alternatives. The market for skills and skills development had to be taken seriously, even where centralised state provision might have been preferred. It was likely that the education and skills development policy environment of a liberated South Africa would require a diversified, decentralised provision, and also that newly emergent forms of knowledge and skill would have to be accommodated. Rapidly changing technology, shifting demands of the global market and the assumption that workplaces would be post-Fordist (without the regimented, de-skilled assembly line) all pointed in the direction of flexible skills responsive to changing needs.

Secondly, Cosatu could not focus on skills or worker development while ignoring the context of general education. The Struggle was being waged around many issues through the United Democratic Front (UDF), but nowhere more fiercely than in the struggle for people's education being fuelled by the youth and spearheaded by the National Education Crisis Committee (NECC). The movement demanded radically new relevance, access and redress in reaction to apartheid provision and curriculum. The existing provision of education and its legacy provided a weak and flawed basis for skills development. The effects of this situation could not be addressed by relying on a transformed education system in the future. Compensation for poor general education needed to be built into the future education and training of adults and workers.

In the quest to find ways and means to solve these tough problems, Cosatu's leadership – from highly qualified officials to organic intellectuals – undertook a series of investigations and participated after 1990 in African National Congress (ANC) education and training policy development. The investigations included visits to many countries. The strongest influence came from the message from various countries, mainly in the Commonwealth, that the best way to shape skills development – and drive investment in skills development – was by setting national standards and making qualifications more purpose-driven, flexible (interlinked) and internationally competitive. The Australian

influence was particularly strong because it was driven most clearly by fraternal trade unions looking to the future of their membership. (The example of the UK was less attractive. The newish system of National Vocational Qualifications – NVQs – appeared compromised in various ways, while 'standards' were associated with Thatcherite pressures to privatise provision and for accountability for results by any providers not driven solely by profit.)

In the meantime, South African business leadership was also concerned about skills development. It had been pressuring the government for improved policy and provision, and had conducted or supported many projects for the improvement of education and training among adults and workers. Although Cosatu was suspicious of these projects and often saw them as exercises in co-opting (buying consent and participation), they had developed relationships through their confrontations with business in multiple negotiations and understood the environment and its pressures. The result was an eventual harmony – with minor discords – regarding the way forward.

Business inputs were respected on their merits by Cosatu. Business South Africa was most supportive of the New Zealand model for education and training. New Zealand legislated the world's first NQF in 1990 after several years of debate and development. The model was more comprehensive than others and used unit standards as a basis for the intelligibility and comprehensibility of the components of qualifications, allowing for flexible combination where necessary. The unit standards described outcomes, assessment criteria and other information necessary for the transparency of the qualification. Use was also made of general level descriptors.

In 1993 Cosatu led the convening of the National Training Board's (NTB) National Training Strategy Initiative (NTSI). (The NTB was a function of the then national Department of Manpower.) By this time, Cosatu had gained ascendancy in relation to the NTB. In line with the national shift to a negotiated settlement, agreements had been reached after some tough confrontation. Cosatu demanded that the NTSI be built on the participation of all sectors with a legitimate interest in the future training dispensation. This reflected principles of democratic action, the practice of allowing only toughly mandated contributions forged during the struggle, the structure of the national negotiations for a settlement going on at the time, and an awareness of the need for general buy-in if the policy was to be effective.

Working Group 2 of the NTSI, like the other working groups, had quadripartite representation from labour, business, the state and providers. After reservations from the then Department of National Education and some providers, notably the old predominantly white craft unions, the members of the group were broadly won over to what was to be the blueprint for the NQF. In most ways the model of the NQF that was eventually set up was what was laid out then, notably the principles, the commitment to using a particular model of outcomes within a standards-based approach, the integration of education and training qualifications, and the institution of separate systems of standards setting and quality assurance. The structure was to consist of eight levels of three bands (General, Further and Higher Education and Training) with a subset for Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET). Consensus was not reached on a few details and forms, but the differences could be worked out in a stakeholder-led national authority, SAQA. Given the number of new concepts and abbreviated terms generated by the process, the level of agreement was remarkable. The most striking change when the plan was turned into legislation was the moderation of an integrated system into an integrated approach.

The plan was published by the NTB in 1994 and was backed by general support in the official plans for education and training, including the new Government of National Unity's White Paper. This enabled the NQF to be established by Parliament in the SAQA Act No 58 of 1995 (RSA 1995), one of the earliest pieces of fresh transformative legislation that supported the status of the NQF as a keystone of renewal. Beyond the legislation, the detailed design of the NQF was created by a working group of systems intellectuals convened by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). This produced *Ways of seeing the NQF* (HSRC 1995), a guide to how the NQF was to work in reality.

By the start of 1997 SAQA's Board and Executive Officer had been appointed under the joint aegis of the Departments of Education and Labour. Twelve representative National Standards Bodies of 36 members each were established for 12 designated learning fields (related to occupational fields). These oversaw the work of hundreds of SGBs creating thousands of unit standards for hundreds of new qualifications. In the following years further legislation was passed establishing the quality assurance components of the NQF: the Higher Education Act of 1997 (RSA 1997) made provision for the creation of the HEQC as a permanent sub-committee of the Council for Higher Education; the Skills Development Act No 97 of 1998 (RSA 1998a) and the Skills Development Levies Act No 9 of 1999 (RSA 1999) replaced the ineffectual training boards with 28 SETAs armed with representative stakeholder boards and the authority and finances to enact the intentions of the NQF (the education and training of adults in South Africa had never been nearly as well resourced); the Further Education and Training (FET) Act No 98 of 1998 (RSA 1998b); and the General and Further Education and Training Quality Assurance (GENFETQA) Act No 58 of 2001 (RSA 2001).

In addition, in 1997 the national DoE established outcomes-based education (OBE) as its own response to the NQF. Teachers from around the country came together to create the outcomes for the eight learning areas of Curriculum 2005, setting in motion an approach to learning that focused on cognitive growth and skill rather than rote learning.

In 2000 the Minister of Education set up a process of review to work on the streamlining of the NQF. Over the next four years detailed reviews by local and international experts reaffirmed the importance of the NQF, while making recommendations for its more effective functioning. The major changes put forward were to combine standard setting and quality assurance, and to make these the responsibility of three QCs instead of some 30 ETQAs and the hundreds of SGBs. (By this time the 12 NSBs had already in effect been phased out, as they had been found to be unwieldy.)

Between 1997 and 2007 the NQF became a major national institution, involving tens of thousands of stakeholders and users (individuals, organisations and great institutions) in formerly unheard-of engagement with standards and quality assurance procedures. SAQA grew into a substantial institution that was nonetheless lean in view of the extent of its tasks of oversight. It established a national database for learner records that will eventually store and evaluate the results of all learning officially recognised in South Africa. It actively promoted the principles and values of the NQF in all areas of education and training. In addition, it took on the role of evaluating (foreign) qualifications from the HSRC, and was a major player in guiding the first steps towards a qualifications framework for the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region, as well as advising other countries on building an NQF. An ongoing critical impact study conducted by SAQA has shown repeatedly how highly what the NQF stands for is valued by all who have had anything to do with it.

In 2007 Cabinet supported the Ministers of Education and Labour in formally recommending the changes put forward in the reviews earlier in the decade. These make SAQA an 'apex organisation' rather than an operational agency, while the tough work of day-to-day standard setting and quality assurance will be carried out by the HEQC, Umalusi (both reporting to the Minister of Education) and a new Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) responsible for the quality of qualifications for learning based in the workplace. The latter will report to the Minister of Labour.

Power in this chronological narrative

This account of the NQF is factually accurate. Its truthfulness is another matter. This is because its managerialist spin creates a myth of an exercise of power that is entirely rational, responsive to contextual need, uncontested, riding a wave of unstoppable international change, smoothly homogenising democratic and market imperatives, and enjoying sustained political will.

Alternative pictures will emerge through the following thumbnail sketches of different worlds of the NQF.

4.1.2 The centrifugal force of stakeholder participation

Stakeholder representation might be seen as a force that has kept the worlds of the NQF separate, sometimes mutually repellent, and only held together by the managed vision and mission captured in the canonical narrative.

Cosatu insisted that the NTSI should have representative participation from four stakeholder sectors: labour, business, the state and providers. This provided the broad pattern for the later structuring of the SAQA Board, the SETA and band ETQA boards, and the NSBs.

The prominence of stakeholders as a feature in the design of the NQF is the product of various developments. The most vivid is the extraordinary success of the UDF in the 1980s in bringing together groupings of the utmost diversity in action against apartheid. In a struggle context, particular qualities of leadership and mobilisation bridged differences and led to a liberating discovery of commonalities.

Of a different character, the labour unions had developed a highly sophisticated body of theory and practice in bargaining forums. This led to a responsive growth of skill in business in contestation and accommodation of pressures, powers and needs. Underlying the sometimes ferocious encounters of labour and business was an understanding that different interests had to be understood and accommodated if South African industry and trade were to be successful and provide work and prosperity. There was a clear understanding, at least among the leaders on both sides, that if agreements and positions were not sufficiently bought into on all sides they were not likely to hold.

From the mid-1980s, while carrying on the armed struggle, the ANC emphasised its character as a broad movement in encounters with South African business and *verligte* (enlightened) Afrikaans intellectuals. This approach informed the negotiated settlement, where structuring the sufficient consensus of all national stakeholders provided models for action in a newly democratic South Africa.

Stakeholder participation was also implicit in influential theorising about social action for development and adult education. This included a strand of humanistic, perspectival and constructivist views of how we understand ourselves and one another. Underlying the practices of participation was a view that in spite of different histories and interests, a common humanity could be found that would lead to united action for the general good.

The idea of stakeholder participation was therefore related to ways of generating, disseminating and sustaining power. It was also the expression of the force of the international thrust for the devolution of power from authoritarian national centres to local interests. (This could be seen as a growth of enlightenment or as the palliating ideology of global corporations.)

Stakeholder participation exhibits a syndrome of problematic aspects that diminish power. Firstly, it depends on the energy of a time of collective enthusiasm for cooperation and change. Take this away (through, for example, the successful achievement of major objectives of the participation) and more narrowly self-interested perspectives can be asserted, with the result that power is diluted into fractiousness. As will be seen in later thumbnails, this might be seen as leading to disastrous levels of distrust around the NQF after the Struggle; this in turn was reflected in the need to accommodate multiple hostile perspectives, resulting in a system of complex and labyrinthine requirements quite at odds with the original vision.

Secondly, and related to the first point, without strongly assertive political management, stakeholder participation creates space for an intensified powerplay. It also makes it extremely difficult to make sense of and harness the play of power in multiple centres of interest.

The third feature relates specifically to conflicting understandings of the idea of representation. For good reason, participating organisations in the struggle – the unions in particular – gave a special emphasis to a highly disciplined form of collective representation reflected in the usage of the term ‘mandate’. The spokespersons or officials of an organisation were mandated to say or do only highly specified things. This created powerful effects in negotiations, but could also severely undermine effective action. It could also be abused by a manipulative leadership. The doctrine of the mandate in mature democracies allows the representative of the people wide latitude to exercise judgement in the people’s interests, on the assumption of bona fides and ultimate accountability.

But perhaps the most power-diminishing aspect of stakeholder representation is the difficulty of managing stakeholder-expert relationships. In settled practice, stakeholders might be expected to agree to the appointment and broad terms of reference of experts, then leave them to come back with a product or a service – which is then subject to approval by the stakeholders and users (or the market). For example, a meeting of stakeholders might decide broadly what kind of functions they would like a computer to fulfil in their project. They would then appoint experts to build the computer, allowing for trials to decide on whether the experts’ computer does what they want it to do. In intensive stakeholder participation, on the other hand, there is a tendency for the stakeholders to want to build the computer, or to be expected to build the computer. In some of the development of the NQF after the legislation there were times when the design of the system and its components was compromised by stakeholders taking roles for which they were not qualified, leading to the draining away of power into dysfunctionality. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the design of Curriculum 2005. Extensive use was made of teachers with no knowledge or experience in curriculum development or assessment and little grasp of sophisticated principles of outcomes-based education.[37]

Fourth, when stakeholders are not merely consulted but have actual powers in decision-making forums, the need to reach agreement leads to a gradual loss of power, both through the exhausting processes of agreement, and through the pressure to agree to agree around terminology for which there is no shared concrete understanding. This leads to the masking of confusions and compromises and the eventual withdrawal of support and power when implementation perforce unmasks the confusions and compromises.

[37] The observation is based in the first place on direct participation in the initial OBE workshops in 1997-98 for Curriculum 2005. However, the really problematic aspects came later when groups of non-specialist teachers were asked to create clarifying documentation for practice. For example, outcomes statements based on applied linguistics principles for language communication (such as ‘demonstrates critical language awareness’) were met with incomprehension and a trivial didactic response. For a valuable discussion of teachers and standards, see Harley & Parker (2006).

Fifth, when, as happened in the NQF, stakeholders suffer attrition for various reasons and withdraw in body or spirit from the system, the remaining die-hards may gain an excessive influence that seriously shifts the character of the institution. (This is a common experience on standing committees of corporations, political parties and projects.)

Stakeholder representation is a conceptual world and a locus of power that has had real effects on the NQF. It has secured the support and power of multiple voices for the NQF, disseminated the experience of responsibility for curriculum and ensured high levels of responsiveness. But it has also been a drain on the power that would have come from more elegant and economical systems and rapid delivery. The very structure made it difficult to move away from intensive stakeholder participation to extensive stakeholder consultation at the right moment. Only in 2007 were the controlling ministries able to agree on an approach that includes the reduction of stakeholder representation.

4.2 The holding centre – the burning star of Enlightenment[38]

4.2.1 Overview

Attempts to draw organograms of the NQF can result in very different configurations, depending on which institution or interest group one puts in the middle. Here, quite tendentiously, I have chosen to see the NQF revolving around an idea, drawing power from the very widespread though not always conscious commitment to that idea, being held together loosely by the idea, but also affected by some problematic radiation from the idea.

4.2.2 Lesedi

The NQF is about enlightenment in the charmingly sentimental way so often found in South Africa where education projects and schools are often called *Lesedi* or variants on that word, that means 'light' in seSotho. *Lesedi ke Matla* means 'light is power'. There is a link to mission morality here, but also to the vivid African experience of light in darkness. But we could say this about any positive educational endeavour, not only the NQF.

4.2.3 Some features of Enlightenment thought and action

The NQF is very clearly a project of the Enlightenment, the broad historical movement that has sought for some five centuries to triumph over the dark powers of prejudice, injustice, superstition, ignorance and the play of hidden forces. The scientific revolution of the 17th century offers astounding examples of advances.[39] The most famous image is that of Newton making sense of physical forces and creating powerful theoretical instruments for dealing with them. Advances in medical understanding are even more striking in the way that they completely overthrow what to us seem the very strange certainties of the time about the nature and working of the body's organs.[40]

Two of the greatest representatives of the Enlightenment spirit were Freud and Marx. For both, their life's work was trying to explain the working of underlying forces that distorted and inhibited human freedom, fulfilment and happiness. They alerted us to the fact that we are often unaware of powers that drive us in ways that lead uncontrollably to unhappiness. Although these powers could be seen as dark pathologies, they were also sources of energy that needed to be brought into the light. (Marx is greatly impressed by the creative force of capitalism, but appalled by its effects; for Freud, the basic drives are life-giving but also frighteningly in need of control.)

The 'unconscious' in social structures is either that which we take for granted and hide in unawareness, or that which seems to us self-evident and rational, while it is actually a temporary reflection of the ruling powers at a particular historical moment. In either form it can be understood as ideology. In this sense, the national qualifications framework (nqf)[41] is part of what has famously been called the 'ideological state apparatus'[42]. In this the system of qualifications is a powerful instrument for telling people where they can and cannot go, keeping them happy with the way

[38] The central idea of this section was suggested by the illuminating discussion in Parker & Deacon (1999).

[39] Recent studies of figures like Copernicus, Tycho Brahe, Kepler, Galileo, Harvey, Boyle, Willis, Hooke, Newton, Wren and others have provided fascinating insights into the age of world-changing scientific discovery. These have all added to the paradigm-changing work of Kuhn (1970) on scientific revolutions. See, for example, Gribbin (2002) and Singh (2004).

[40] The mixture of superstition and rationality is beautifully unpacked in Zimmer (2004).

[41] Here and elsewhere, lower case for nqf or qf indicates that this is not the formal institution or statutory body, but the informal, in some ways unconscious framework that exists even where there is no NQF.

[42] Althusser's (1971) characteristic expression.

things are and supplying the needs of state and economy. The NQF is an attempt to take qualifications out of the taken-for-granted, and to make the system of qualifications into a conscious, transparent ideological instrument that better serves the ends of humanity, justice and wellbeing.

The Enlightenment quest for scientific understanding has been inseparable from a therapeutic intention. In fact it is clear in Marx's view that we seek to understand the world in order to change it, and that it is in changing it that we best understand it.

Marx and Freud are emblematic of many Enlightenment figures, including economists and natural scientists and even the maligned positivists and behaviourists, who wanted to demystify the elemental powers governing our lives, bring them into the open and harness or defeat them.

This quest sees itself often enough as complicit in the play of interests. Ideas and institutions may lift themselves momentarily above the play of material interests and symbolic and physical power – there are different views on whether this is possible. In the Marxist tradition, ideas and institutions are seen as reflecting the prevailing or emerging 'ownership and relations of production'. However, ideas and institutions are not passive or inert reflections of an underlying reality, but are involved in a mutually transforming interplay with material interests, sometimes harmoniously, often in opposition and mutual frustration, occasionally in revolutionary violence. In the late 20th century it became difficult to sustain such a clear model of social change. On the one hand, shifts from production to consumption and knowledge as sources of wealth and power, and the globalised mobility of capital, made the simplicity difficult to sustain. This was perhaps related to the rise of theories that emphasised the unpredictable patterns created by the working of language, discourse, image, sign and power. These theories can be seen to support or challenge the hegemony of globalised neo-liberalism, depending on your point of view. (The theorising of the relationship between ideas or institutions and underlying socio-economic interests has been weak in accounting for how the substructure is translated into the superstructure. One of the most serious efforts to understand how this works is found in Bernstein's work on language, curriculum and class.)

4.2.4 Some disenchantment about the Enlightenment

In its unmasking and therapeutic intents, the Enlightenment mission remains noble and has profoundly changed the world. But it has its critics. I will touch on three linked criticisms:

The first argues against Enlightenment assumptions that it is possible to find rational explanations and predictions for everything if only we look hard enough. This view is sometimes dangerous, if it leads to ignoring the nature and play of power and the elusiveness of meaning.[43] The idea of 'unmasking', that presumes a coherent underlying foundation of truth, has also been seen as problematic in that it may oversimplify the sources and trajectories of meaning and power.

The second criticism is a view that, in seeking to demystify everything, the Enlightenment treated important and functional human resources as irrational and as things to be eradicated. Habits, practices and structures, traditional communities, religious orders that look irrational and perhaps unjust might have a deeper wisdom than rationality and be among the sources of human wellbeing.[44] This argument takes an extreme form when some thinkers blame the Enlightenment for the holocaust. These critics see that rationalism and popularised forms of scientific thinking, plus the element in the Enlightenment that seeks to exercise surveillance, control and dominance, have much to do with the bureaucratic emptiness in much of modernity. This might include Fordism (as portrayed so vividly in the massed and repetitive factories in Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*), as well as barbaric wars and the genocides of the 20th century.

The third form of criticism sees that Enlightenment thinking (and 'bourgeois' thinking more generally) sees itself as something with objective validity, somehow transcending the cultural and contextual rootedness of lesser forms of life. In some forms it can become arrogant about its claims to justice and rightness. (It is also often self-correcting:

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[43] This criticism is implicit in much of post-modernism and hermeneutic thinking, epitomised especially by Foucault (in terms of power) and Derrida (in terms of meaning). In some ways Marx seems optimistic in an occasionally essentialist focus on the workings of the economic substructure; the failure to accommodate the vast possibilities of the working of irrationality, from personal tyranny to the tyranny of 'signs' in a consumer-oriented world, has been a major problem for serious left-wing analysis.

[44] A notable proponent of this idea is the eccentric philosopher of science Feyerabend (1975), who champions the formal church critique of Galileo's new truths. Cardinal Bellarmine, Galileo's prosecutor (in arguments similar to those put forward by Dostoyevski's Ivan Karamazov) is seen as defending the necessary fictions that human beings need to sustain themselves in a hostile universe.

great Enlightenment thinkers have given themselves to marking out the human limits of reason, language and knowledge.)

4.2.5 How the NQF shares positive and negative possibilities of the Enlightenment

The NQF is an enlightenment project because it seeks to bring to the surface, unmask, harness or eliminate the whole muddle of irrationalities around qualifications. Its therapeutic intents include justice, redress for past wrongs and a more effective and valid fit between the learning on offer in South Africa and the multiple needs of the society. Its targets are the conflicting or de-linked systems, hidden curriculum, distorting power, masked interests and nontransparent practices of the unacknowledged nqf. (I will shortly look more closely at what this means.) In their place it puts an explicit, coherent, official national system for qualifications. Where the old system mystified, inhibited and limited, this system is meant to be accessible, developmental, supporting careers open to a myriad talents, all responsive to the most important needs of the society. More concretely, the NQF intends to make public (and available for participation) who decides on qualifications and manages them, how these things are done and how they relate to broader social and educational policies.

The NQF – or at least some of its proponents – have had in addition a related intention to challenge socially powerful assumptions about what constitutes knowledge, who defines knowledge, and who should be given access to knowledge. The concern here was to recognise, in particular, forms of experiential learning that are important for the society but tend to be allocated very little status. (A fairly radical example would be the need to acknowledge the depths of the capabilities required by satisfactory parenting.) This was to prove one of the most contested features of the NQF.

It should be clear by now that as an enlightenment project the NQF may well have its downside. It may be in its nature (though not necessarily so) to try to be too rational and controlling; it is likely to neglect or override sensitive practices and traditions that may have their own wisdom, or to eliminate practices to which people are deeply attached even though they look like folly to the rational eye. And it may set out with a cheerful sense that reason must prevail and seriously underestimate the unfathomable, unpredictable play of power.

The story of the NQF amply illustrates the virtues and benefits of the enlightenment quest, and suffers in one way or another from the discontents of enlightenment. It has opened up issues, created awareness, recognised and valued different ways of knowing. But it may also have trampled on cherished ways of doing things, engulfed practitioners and enterprises in procedures that get in the way of creativity, and depressed the essential mystery of much expertise. In one of Foucault's most haunting images, the discourse of caring and curing demands monitoring and degenerates (or fulfils itself) in a prison – the Panopticon – designed to destroy all privacy and allow eternal surveillance.[45]

4.2.6 How the NQF comes short of the full power of an Enlightenment project

All Enlightenment projects come short of some notional ideal of achieved theory flowing seamlessly into achieved practice, or of new understanding perfectly reflected in therapy. The theorists of the 17th century were by no means 'pure' theorists. Their work often started with messy practical problems and ended with messy practical applications – but not always. People struggled to see how the new theories applied to reality, and sometimes it took decades for the theory to find a use.[46] At the same time, even the most rational theorists continued their daily lives firmly within the framework of the unscientific beliefs that they were helping to overthrow. This observation applies equally to the lives of Marx and Freud and to the implementation of their ideas.

As the account below suggests, the NQF constitutes a project shot through with the Enlightenment intent, but which might be seen to fall short especially in the area of inquiry. Born in times of great pressure for change, there were many short-cuts in the quest for understanding of the issues with which the NQF was concerned, or in the dissemination of such understanding.

There was extensive deliberation about structures and action, but very little public research into some of the rele-

[45] Foucault used this idea of Bentham's utilitarian thinking (positively concerned with human wellbeing) as a key image in his *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison* (Hoy 1986).

[46] In this respect Zimmer (2004) provides a most interesting account of Locke's empirical reaction to the new understandings of physiology that were still highly theoretical. Swift's island of Laputa in *Gulliver's Travels* is a satire on the passion of his period for apparently useless theoretical investigation.

vant questions. In addition, considerable faith was placed in international and local advocacy and in the persuasiveness of arguments without evidence. Questions that could have been asked in terms of a deeper curiosity may have included questions about the lie of the land: What is the nature of the existing nqf in South Africa, and what are its effects? How do the people who might be required to implement innovation understand and implement their current practices – in assessment, curriculum, the promotion of quality? How, and how well, do related practices actually work in other countries – and how well do these fit with our research into our own cultures of implementation and embedded understandings of how things ought to be done? Are there substantive reasons (for example in 'the nature of knowledge') for differentiation?

Questions might also have been asked about the feasibility of implementing the innovations: How would these look to those required to implement them? What would they entail in terms of cost, person-power, institutionalisation? What would the most effective roll-out be like? One searches in vain among the records in South Africa and overseas experiments in NQFs for enquiry about implementation, either in terms of pilot applications, or even merely of thorough simulation exercises.

It may be true that nothing would have happened if there had been much public research. But the play of power had much to do with the lack of enquiry and formal research. The revolutionary intent required certainties and action. A certain favouring of an idea of action research may have encouraged a view of full implementation as experimental. Where stakeholders had sectoral insights into why they needed an NQF and how they saw it working, these were treated as insider knowledge to be kept under wraps in the interests of competitive advantages in negotiations. (This applied especially to the representatives of business and labour, but also later to the wielders of power in the DoE.) A more searching insight is the idea that the NQF has been based on such fragile alliances on all sides that at no time in its history has it been 'the right political moment' to research the range of questions set out above.[47] Faced with persuasive scenarios of the effects of implementation, many of those 'sutured' into the NQF discourse might have abandoned the project.

This disjunction between theory and legislation on the one hand and understanding and therapeutic action on the other had short-term political benefits, but posed serious long-term problems, both relating to sustained buy-in from stakeholders to multiplication of perplexing complexities that might have been avoided with proper diagnosis. In this the NQF is like most innovative policy in South Africa.[48]

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[47] This point is implicit in Lugg (2007). However, the point has been firmed up in subsequent correspondence with Lugg.

[48] Pendlebury & Enslin (2004), Feinstein (2007), Govender (2007) and Maharaj in O'Malley (2007), among others, throw much light on the gap between intention and reality in social and cultural projects in South Africa since 1994.

5. THE FIRST CIRCLE OF STAKEHOLDERS

5.1 Overview

Any of the major stakeholder sectors in the first circle might have taken precedence for one reason or another. The state, which initiated NQF-like ideas in the early 1980s, that eventually legislated the NQF into being and that has seen itself as housing and controlling the NQF, might have taken first place. Business took a lead in shaping some key aspects of the NQF, and has, as a result of the Skills Development Levies Act, paid for the clearest direct implementation of the framework. The people and their representatives should take first place, but as we shall see, their relationship with the NQF is necessarily remote and symbolic. Providers of education and training, tragically perhaps, constitute the sector that most clearly does not deserve precedence among the shaping powers of the NQF, and later came to play a highly ambiguous part in the fortunes of the NQF. In the end it seems that the world of labour and, more specifically, of a segment of Cosatu, takes precedence here, as it does in the canonical narrative.

5.2 The world of labour[49]

By 1989, as we have seen, various trends and interests started coming together to create the impetus that was to lead to the NQF. Externally there was the influence of the world of the ascendant global market, including the dramatic decline and fall of major centrally managed economies. There was also the world of standards-based development, that was partially related to globalisation, but which had left and right manifestations.[50]

In South Africa there was a gathering wave of considerable power around the prospects of imminent change. The power was enabled by the decay of the apartheid state, reflected in its energy-sapping swings between enlightened reform and hard-line reaction. But the power was generated massively by the success of collective mass action across multiple interest groups in the UDF and by the broader MDM, working together with the still-exiled ANC. The ANC's policy of continuing the armed struggle but engaging in friendly exchanges with powerful sectors in the country, from business leadership to enlightened Afrikaner intellectuals, contributed to this power.

The Africanists – the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), the Azanian People's Organisation (Azapo), the Pan African Congress (PAC) in exile, and a grouping of affiliated unions – offered interesting and challenging perspectives on matters of education and culture throughout the struggle. There was at times intense hostility felt by this sector against the MDM's approaches and general dominance. But the movement had a poor grasp of powerplay and were perhaps too removed from the underlying play of power in economy and world politics. Some Africanist thinking came to be incorporated into mainline political positions. Its concerns with indigenous languages and cultures as sources of confidence and self-assertion were to be marginalised, but not completely ignored, in the new South Africa.[51]

Within the MDM the power of the unions joined in the Cosatu federation seemed massive. They could jointly claim a base of committed paying membership far larger than any organisation in the country other than the Zionist churches, which were not actively part of the struggle. They had proven their value to their membership in shaping and leading effective wage negotiations and in giving a voice to the workers of South Africa that could not be – and was not – ignored. Their greatest source of power was their ability to control major economic effects, most obviously through strike action. But their power was generated, shaped, stored and controlled with considerable effect because of the role of a vanguard of intellectuals who led the development of policy and effective practices, including the design and provision of education in organisations (such as leadership training for shop stewards, and conscientisation about issues of rights, conditions of service, health and safety).

There can be little doubt of the overwhelming importance of this education in ensuring the impact of most confronta-

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[49] This section is shaped by my personal engagement in the development of the NQF and is informed by discussions with various associates listed in the acknowledgements. However, it owes a particular debt to the challenge of coming to terms with Lugg's (2007) thesis, which has left me – and others – with a feeling that we understood very little of what was really going on. Lugg in turn, like all of us, owes a great deal to Adrienne Bird for her campaigning and working for the NQF, and for her too-rare and fine writings on the subject (Bird 1990 and 1992, but also major work for the International Labour Organisation not cited here). This does not mean that either Lugg or Bird would necessarily endorse the story as I tell it. For a view that was to become a source of disagreement about the NQF, see Favish & Omar (1992). For a broad view see Von Holdt (1991).

[50] Allais (2007) undertakes a masterly analysis of globalisation and neo-liberalism and links these to contradictory features of the NQF.

[51] See Horsthemke (2004) for an exploration of the problems of including indigenous knowledge in the curriculum.

tions with employers and government. This included understanding the principles of action as well as the modes of presentation of cases. It meant having an informed base for understanding the possibilities and limits of negotiation or confrontation. It included being able to engage at times in Machiavellian powerplay against a manipulative business management that could draw on major resources of applied expertise. It demanded an understanding of the institutional and legal structures of the exercise of power and being deeply informed by some theories of the play of power. (The analytical and critical theories of Marx/Lenin/Gramsci/Althusser were prominent.) It also meant working in a way that might envisage a world in which the workers' state controlled the economy and there were no capitalists – by then a dwindling but still influential motif – but which in the meantime would rather see capitalist industry flourishing than failing.

The education of workers for effective shop-floor organisation made the intellectual leadership intensely aware of the devastating results of nearly 40 years of apartheid education – or of no education at all. This imposed general limits on the basic knowledge and broader conceptual frameworks that workers could mobilise in improving their situation. More importantly in the long term, it put limits on workers' capacity to develop marketable skills and improve their bargaining position. The provision of education and training for employees in South Africa was grossly inadequate, even compared to the poor skills legacy of the UK – the imperial source of South African education and training structures. Provision was negligible compared to Germany, whose post-war economic recovery owed much to enlightened skills development, and to the Asian Tigers. But even if the provision were to be improved, the level of readiness (for example, in terms of literacy and numeracy) was generally too low to allow for effective uptake of the provision.

Insight into the poor general readiness of workers for training had to be set against the huge respect that many poorly-educated workers deserved. Many were highly skilled in very specific ways, without the credentials. Some could be brilliantly resourceful in solving situated problems – technical, communal, interpersonal, ethical – where they might put those with high levels of formal education in the shade for wisdom and endurance. This situation became intolerable given the formal lack of access to recognition of rich capabilities. It was made even worse than in other societies through the historical confluence of race and class prejudice and privilege in access to learning, recognition and power. At the same time there was no gainsaying that even streetwise workers usually lacked the decontextualised knowledge frameworks provided by general education that are a vital source of power in modern society.[52] A shop steward of great situated insight could find himself helpless against those who wielded the power of abstract legal or financial principles.

This view on the part of the unions was intensified by the understanding that Fordism was coming to an end.[53] In First World economies the fragmented, de-skilled, mechanistic use of human automatons – best pictured as mindlessly servicing assembly lines – was being replaced by IT, automation and teams of intelligent workers with sufficient insight and knowledge to be flexibly responsive to new needs and technologies. A quite different form of knowledge would be needed compared with the 'monkey see, monkey do' form of training demanded by Fordism. A much deeper integration of education and training would be needed in the future within a framework of lifelong learning.

In spite of this experience, the intellectual and educational leadership of Cosatu had reservations about adult literacy and basic education in the workplace. Popular notions in the world of adult education like learner-centredness, a concern with individual self-esteem, certain aspects of constructivism, concerns for indigenous language and knowledge and so on – many of the things most valued by the Africanists – could be seen as lacking the tough edge of realism in modern life, especially its technological demands. In spite of affinities, socialists did not always look with favour on the emancipatory pedagogy of Paulo Freire. It could be seen as slow and soft-centred in the face of the apparent priority of kick-starting the knowledge economy onto the cutting edge of modernisation – to use two of the cliché s much favoured by business and readily picked up by the unions and politicians. Although the trade unions wanted recognition of the enabling knowledge and skills of most experienced but poorly-educated workers, policy reflections led to a favouring of a high skills orientation for the general success of a new South Africa. (The high-

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52 Aitchison (1983) showed the seriousness of the problem in higher education of an inability to distance oneself from immediate situations and local contexts. This has been a matter of increasing concern with those concerned with redress and equity in access to education and training opportunities.

53 Mukora (2006) makes an interesting argument that the end of Fordism was either an illusion or partial. The critique of the end of Fordism lies in an analysis that focuses on the shift to service industries and privatised employment in rich countries, while meaningless, repetitive Fordist production is carried out in the sweatshops of poor countries.

skills debate is complex and is not directly relevant to the NQF, which should ideally be able to accommodate and encourage skills of all needed levels.)

All of these perspectives and concerns helped to make the ideas underlying the NQF attractive to union and training leadership. The emerging features of NQFs seemed to provide the best possible response to the need for worker empowerment through learning. (See Section 6.2.4, *The world of NQFs*.)

To the task of shaping up what was to become the NQF, union leadership brought the power of passion, acumen and an ability to be realistic about trends in world politics and economics. They were experienced in powerplay, understood the constraining and constructive power of legal and institutional structures and had a focused understanding of the underlying play of power through social and economic forces that gave them the edge over many political and business adversaries. They also had the power of morale and the excitement of those who knew that they, more than any other grouping at the time, were responsible for an idea whose time had come, and which they needed to take at the flood or be bound in shallows and miseries (to paraphrase Shakespeare). By comparison, thinking in the world of education, including the NECC, was focused on messy realities like restoring positive order, or on critique of the old order, while 'People's Education' was comparatively inchoate.

The unions also had the power of a focused need. Their analysis concerned the education and training needs of adult workers. We have seen why this had to concern itself with general education provision and the recognition of experiential learning, and not merely with work-related education and training. However, adults, whether in adult education or in training, have a well-recognised motivating focus on immediate tasks and limited time to master those immediate tasks. However profound the recognition of the need for general education frameworks and for forms of vertical progression, the need for fast-tracking and short cuts had to be borne in mind at all times. Ideally, one would ultimately have a system of schooling that would make short cuts unnecessary for the vast majority of adults – especially by having some explicit relationship to the world of work. But there were still two generations of workers, in employment or searching for employment, to be served by integrated education and training.

How could the backlog in provision be made good in the emerging picture of the likely future of South Africa? One view placed much emphasis on relatively centralised state provision through Technical Colleges, Technikons (now Universities of Technology) and Regional Training Centres (newly-established in the 1980s). These were considered to have general records of poor delivery, serious problems in responding flexibly to changing technologies and the shift to service industries, and low esteem beside the general education system. By contrast, trade unionists knew the power of informal and nonformal learning in and around the workplace. Daily encounters provided examples of workers with poor backgrounds but normal measures of ability who had grown enormously beyond their educationally disadvantaged backgrounds into a profound grasp of the languages, interpersonal workings, surface technologies and complex routines in their particular factory or commercial operation.

Yet this workplace-based learning was unsatisfactory in all sorts of ways. Firstly, it was for the most part unrecognised either on paper or in salary slips. Although the intelligentsia in the unions who were concerned with education and training may have had little respect for the hierarchy of formal qualifications, union membership made it clear in various forums that it was motivated by an aspiration to paper qualifications.

Secondly, the weakness of general conceptual, scientific and linguistic underpinnings made it very difficult to transcend limited levels of operational instruction – to grow and to reach a higher level of power and effectiveness.

Thirdly, workplace-based instruction was deeply inefficient in using the potential of the workplace as a locus for learning. The dwindling apprenticeship system, only recently opened to black South Africans, may in its heyday have achieved an adequate blend of knowledge and skill in educative workplaces, but it depended at its best on intimate communities of craft knowledge, and was often exploitative. Its dependence on service for a fixed period was particularly problematic: an apprentice who could demonstrate mastery after a year still had to stay subservient for three or four more; others who were not necessarily competent after four years might still get their certificates. Some of its features might be replicated in a new order, but it needed to be re-imagined.

The particular weakness of South African workers as learners and trainees because of the legacy of apartheid education made the unions look to a more ambitious model of an NQF than they had seen in Australia and other places. The question of whether the framework should articulate the worlds of education and training (link the two qualifications ladders rather than have a single ladder) or integrate them was the subject of fierce debate. This led to the conclusion that there should be a strictly integrated system within an integrated Department of Lifelong Learning (DoLL) under a Ministry of Lifelong Learning (MoLL – the acronyms did not please the feminists and were bandied about jokingly for a short period) in the place of the contending apartheid empires of education and manpower. Integration

was passionately promoted, though it did not secure the favour of business and was regarded with ambivalence by education policy thinkers.

Whatever direction was taken, it was going to be necessary to mobilise resources beyond the national budget available for education. This was already stretched to finance a system that seemed to offer the least cost-effectiveness. Something was needed that enabled the combination of state and private resources, that encouraged the voluntary deployment of resources and contexts for learning in all sectors and ensured that the key state objectives of reconstruction (justice, redress, quality learning, unleashing of productive and creative energies) be satisfied in the process. The unions had the vivid example before them of an apparently enlightened tax incentive system set up by the reformist state; this had the government subsidising sumptuous management lunches 'for training purposes' with no apparent learning gains. Something else was needed.

It should be clear by now that the issues were of great complexity and needed handling on various fronts. The account so far should have established the logic of need and power behind the NQF – as seen from Cosatu's perspective. The story told above is as accurate as possible. Yet it is misleading in its portrayal of a compelling logic around a coherent centre. In reality, the NQF was largely the product of brilliant, visionary and determined education and training leadership centred virtually entirely in only one of the more powerful of Cosatu's many unions (the National Union of Metalworkers (Numsa)). The impression that this leadership established a smooth hegemony within Cosatu by the compelling logic of its well-researched position is seriously misleading. The proponents of the NQF had to contend with both differences and indifference in their march towards the passing of the SAQA Act in 1995.

A trade union is only peripherally concerned with the broader provision of education and training. Its constituency is essentially taken up with wages and conditions of service, and with matters of rights and dignity. The unions must constantly combat exploitation and contest the argumentative power of management. To do this they need expertise in areas like economics, finance, labour law, bargaining practices, health and safety. Education and training may well come low on this list. The relationship between experts and the constituency that they serve is always problematic. Sustaining the idea of the importance of education in the face of the other priorities in the adult world of work takes tough achievements of leadership, especially in a space that jealously guards the membership's right to confer or withdraw the mandate. Even training needs to be closely related to the advantages it provides in terms of job security, upward mobility and advantages in the bargaining forum. Keeping the thinking that led to the NQF on the agenda and sustaining its support was a significant achievement of power management.

But the NQF was also opposed from within Cosatu. In order to clarify and strengthen Cosatu's position on education and training, an extensive Participatory Research Programme (PRP) was conducted in the early 1990s. A project of this kind, seeking to establish the membership's views and preferences in areas in which they are not especially informed (especially curriculum design) faces almost insuperable methodological problems. In essence, in such a situation a raw opinion survey can be disabling, get invalid results and produce decidedly misleading findings. It is preferable to engage in a dialectical process of information, education, opinion formation and open-ended reflection within well-constructed focused groups. But such a process is seriously open to powerplay and manipulation by a leadership with a decided agenda. In the event the PRP came up with some findings and concerns that were hostile to the NQF.

The first concern of internal opposition was a broad political position. From this perspective the NQF was seen as part of a neo-liberal thrust to privatise provision and the production of standards, leaving the future state with control of nothing but the framework. At a time when profound hopes were attached to the power of a directive centralised state, this was a hot issue. But the argument was strategic rather than principled, in that the proponents of the NQF in the unions saw the NQF as the best starting point for mobilising, and in fact commanding, the resources of the whole society in the interests of education and training. They certainly did not see it from a neo-liberal perspective, as did the worlds of business. In the short term, the proponents of the NQF won the skirmish on this point, though – as we shall see – they may have lost the battle in the long term.

The second concern of the opposition to the NQF idea came from research into the union membership's view of what constituted an adequate education for workers. In effect, this amounted to a replication of their experience of the education they had had too little of or had missed out on.[54] Many workers wanted, in effect, provision that replicated (with suitable adaptations) the full schooling curriculum for adults. Serious theoretical research into adult curric-

[54] Reagan's (1986) research into language and educational issues among industrial workers, in which I was a co-researcher, and my own into reading and literacy (French 1988) showed workers strongly in favour of 'classical' languages and formal schooling standards for their children. While priding themselves in their capabilities in spite of limited education, they tended to see themselves as beyond further learning.

ula commissioned by the PRP supported the idea that there were no quick fixes to creating the basis for further learning, and that basic literacy was not enough to correct the lack of foundation in scientific and mathematical concepts and other forms of knowledge best established in schooling. Again, the difference was strategic rather than principled. The proponents of the NQF believed with equal passion in the need for a full and coherent curriculum, but believed it could be better secured, and be much more responsive to context and need, if it was generated in the NQF model. Again, the NQF leadership won out in this, perhaps through being better positioned within Cosatu's higher power structures, only to find the issue returning to haunt the NQF long after the PRP had been closed.

The idea of the NQF was also coolly received in closely related policy processes. It was adopted in a low-key and reluctant way through the processes of ANC policy formation as well as in the work of the National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI). This is touched on in Section 5.1, *The worlds of providers*.

The triumphant passing of the SAQA Act could perhaps be seen in terms of a confluence of power into a power vacuum. The positive power factors include the focus, preparedness and persuasiveness of the world of NQF enthusiasts, in which a diversity of sectors, particularly business but led by Cosatu, commanded a hope that nothing else could offer. This was at a moment when the new government of national unity needed a distinctive, transformative plan that was clearly different from the past, yet could secure general support. The position was consolidated by support from the leadership of the Parliamentary Committee on Education. The South African Qualifications Act No 58 (RSA 1995) was very generally prefigured in the government White Paper on Education and predated the Education Act (No 27) of 1996. The NQF offered a specific intervention of promise when the education policy could make only very general commitments. The vacuum was represented by the fact that the official world of education provision was struggling with the compromises and accommodations of the negotiated settlement, and with huge challenges of maintaining operations while converting some 18 segregated departments of education into a single national system. The NQF filled a space that might otherwise have been given over to complex, slow and potentially unmanageable curriculum debates. At the same time, the Act contained compromises that were to exact their toll, most notably around the commitment to an integrated approach, that some in labour thought weakened the position, while some in business felt it distorted the concept.

After 1994 labour's position in relation to the NQF diminished considerably, or became indirect. Many members of the union intelligentsia migrated into politics, government departments or new business leadership roles. Several union enthusiasts moved to the Department of Labour (DoL), which became the main bearer of the legacy of the NQF as envisaged by the unions. Their main work was to be the creation of the National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS), and particularly the Skills Development Act No 97 of 1998 and subsequent legislation to finance the SETAs empowered by a significant tax on companies' wage bills. This was intended to oblige and shape investment in companies' own workplace-related learning, or provide a subsidy for those companies whose provision created a pool of skill for nonproviding and noncontributing companies.

The unions still had widespread participation in the NQF through stakeholder representation, including membership of the SAQA Board, the short-lived National Standards Bodies and the SETA boards. Without strong and committed intellectual support for education and training in the unions, later union representation has in some sectors been weak, especially in relation to agencies with a more direct interest in the NSDS (such as the businesses and industries that pay and want to see a return, and the private providers).

It would give a misleading picture of the flow of power to and from the NQF through the world of the unions if one were to fail to mention the role of brilliant and impassioned individuals and the role of their personal experience and contacts in the shaping of the NQF. For example, it seems to have been both personal and professional contacts with Australian union leadership that gave a special spin to the position presented as that of the unions. Mention of personal influence was strictly discouraged on the democratic left, however. Authorship of an article or an approach was almost always attributed to the collective, even when it was marked by a distinctive personal will and voice. This anonymity could, and did at times, mask authoritarian exercises of personal power. The question of personal power is touched on when we look at the world of NQF enthusiasts.

5.3 The world of business[55]

The power of the world of business is massive, pervasive and diverse. It is enacted by banks and mining compa-

[55] This section is again informed by my involvement in the development of the NQF, but owes much to discussions with Bryan Phillips through the formative years, and to some vivid recent correspondence. Discussions with Erik Hallendorff have also given me insights for this section, but his perspectives have been strongly coloured by his intense professional concern with the educational values of NQF practices. Other business perspectives have been revealed especially in work with SETAs. For a high-level business view of education and training, see Etheredge (1984).

nies, by chain stores and small traders and manufacturers. Yet it has little solidarity, little voice, little mobilising power in the way that labour has – other than when something rare moves all the hidden hands of self-interest at once. The power of business touches us daily through the media owned by business, in business dailies, weeklies and supplements. It reaches us through advertisements. We engage in it with every transaction involving money. It shapes our desires moment by moment by the ways in which it extends and limits our possibilities. But it is almost impossible to locate the centre of power.

For this reason it is much more difficult to place the NQF's relationship to the power of the worlds of business than it is to those of labour. There are indeed agencies that speak for business. Business Unity South Africa (BUSA – created in 2003 through a merger of the Black Business Council and Business South Africa) currently sees itself as the voice of business. Its members are associations representing various sectors of organised business, among them the SA Chamber of Business (SACOB) supported by 100 affiliated local chambers of commerce and industry. It has standing committees that research, inform and sometimes develop policy, including a Committee on Education and Training. However, it struggles to mobilise membership uniformly, even around issues of core business interest like general taxation. Inasmuch as it forms a position on education and training, this is likely to be a specialised position supported by a group of visionary individuals, perhaps with a corporation or two with special views on the subject standing behind it. As we can see in the worlds of labour, this is not altogether unlike the reality there, except that the claim that 'business stands behind the NQF' would generally be less powerful or plausible than a similar claim regarding the unions. In the case of the very significant business support for the NQF in its formative years, it would be more accurate to say that business was happy to be ignorant or vaguely supportive at a distance.

The original power behind business support for the NQF did in fact derive from a small group of individuals with responsibility for adult education and training in one of the large mining corporations, and interests in the private provision of adult literacy and basic education. A passionate and sharply focused visionary grasp of the potential of the NQF to solve chronic problems of provision of education and training in industry informed the thinking of this group. They experimented early on with aspects of standards-based design. They were well connected with some of the best minds in business leadership, and became the spokespeople on the NQF for BUSA through the 1990s. They also had personal connections in New Zealand, where the world's first NQF was being set up, and were the major influence in some of the basic design of the NQF in terms of the New Zealand model – a design that was much more comprehensively structured than the Australian version that had first influenced the unions.

It is easy to see why top leaders in business, and particularly industry, were interested in an idea like the NQF. They were in a tough position. Whatever the truth of claims that in the past business interests had been behind racial domination in South Africa, most of the leadership were now opposed to the apartheid regime, and were pushing 'win-win' negotiated solutions with vigour. They had the confidence of the emerging 'triumph' of global free-market capitalism, and were following the stumbling fortunes of world socialism, buoyed by the broadening social influence of business worldwide, though ambivalent about its role in provision beyond core business. They were intensely critical of the levels of state interference by the apartheid government, with its many remnants of protectionism and legislation unfriendly to the free market, not to mention its increasingly disastrous economic management. But the opening up of the market, which seemed inevitable, presented threats in terms of skills. They were decidedly against the obscurantists of the Department of Education and Training (DET) and supportive of the reformist moves since the De Lange Commission, where the spirit of rationalisation was located mainly in the Department of Manpower (after 1994 the DoL). They were frustrated by the failure to implement most of the reforms with any effect. Business made frequent claims about the high costs of labour inefficiencies in South Africa. In addition, like all aware South Africans, they were concerned about the devastation of much general education in the recurring bouts of student and community activism and sterile government reaction.

On the whole, business and industry have tended to enter with reluctance into training and with distaste into adult literacy and basic education, arguing that it was nowhere near their core business, that they paid high taxes and that the state was responsible for the underlying poverty in knowledge and skills. They believed the deficiency should be corrected through adequate public education. Their economic analysis when contributing to education policy forums convinced them that a post-apartheid government would not be able to afford anything more than the maintenance of formal education provision. The hopes of the left for intensive corrective action – such as massive new provision – would be supported neither by budget nor by political will. (In the event, this analysis proved to be spot on.) There was a clear need to create a basis for skills formation that would be flexible, responsive, under their control or guidance and would make optimal use of resources, especially if paid for directly or even provided directly. The idea of a standards-based provision free of an arcane, conservative and irrelevant input-dominated curriculum was appealing. It resonated with business management thinking that favoured goal-oriented 'planning back' from objectives guided by vision. The idea of a framework that would allow for diversity in multiple contexts with maximum deregu-

lation, yet allow for generalised accountability against standards, seemed to be the best possibility for results. The broad systematic logic of the NQF and its apparent freedom from ideology or cultural bias was also attractive.

In addition, an especially appealing feature of the standards-based idea was that it would remove the possibility of accusations of racial discrimination from decisions about appointments and the award of certificates of competence. The processes of stakeholder participation in the creation of standards would ensure that these were agreed upon, and in a certain sense, objective. After that, given approved assessment protocols, questions of awards, selection and placement would be seen as fair against the standards – the candidates could either do what was required or they couldn't. In addition, labour mobility would be encouraged and its costs would be rationalised because of the reliable registration of skills on a national database.

Business thus contributed, through a highly specialised group, to the modelling of the original idea of the NQF. However, apart from the forceful influence on the initial design, both the powerplay and play of power of business have been low-key and disseminated rather than readily identifiable by its positions. In some respects, the business sector may be seen to have lost out in the direct power stakes of the NQF. But the picture is extremely complex.

Between 1995 and about 1998 the original group became increasingly critical and in some ways alienated from the unfolding of the actual NQF. The butt of their criticism lay in the growth of labyrinthine procedures of regulation and in the focus on integration and comprehensiveness, which seemed to blunt the focus they wanted on specific industry needs. (Yet some might argue that these were implicit in the systems that they had promoted.) Even more strongly, some of the business leaders involved objected to the shift to a focus on inputs, which went against the economy of a model that focused on the validity of the assessment of competence. The passing of the Skills Development Levies Act seemed to the most influential of the original business leaders to be intolerably coercive. Far from agreeing that the NQF was a typical neo-liberal contrivance, as some critics of the NQF claim, the business originators of the NQF believe it has become an instrument of the remnants of a centralising socialist tendency in South African education politics.

With the NSBs, and even more the NSDS and the establishment of the SETAs, the power of business shifted from 1999 to another constituency. Some of the original business-linked guardians of the NQF idea became influential consultants, often designing or implementing specific details of the NQF without necessarily agreeing with the overall model any more. At this time, though, representation was considerably broadened by the SETAs, with business often considering implicitly that it owned them, since it paid for them. Different productive sectors performed very differently in the fulfilment of the NSDS, but sector-specific training management came to have much more say in the implementation of the NQF. Some expanded its working, some subverted it, many took it in their own direction. In some industries the NQF has been used as a tool for a considerable growth in provision. In others the NQF gets lip service at best. There was also in many sectors a relative neglect of the principles of redress and equity in skills development, and a focus on higher-level skills in the implementation of learnerships.

It is therefore difficult to say if the charge of power that business has put into the implementation of the NQF is as positive as the charge that went into its formation. It has been pointed out already that South African business has in general considerable resistance to involvement in education and training beyond training for very specific industry operations. A visionary top management can be very supportive of education and training, including learning in the workplace, but middle management is generally subject to pressures of production that make it hostile to putting resources and time into broader education and training. The NQF, if it is seen to include the provisions of the NSDS, must be credited with considerable achievement in obliging many areas of business and industry to take a structured interest in education and training. However, many complain that the costs and complexities are much greater than they need be.

The business and industry sector has provided the terrain for the most impressive direct effects of the NQF, though indirect effects may be even stronger in formal education provision. The NQF has lifted levels of awareness and thoughtfulness about education and training in business and industry – and in some cases stimulated growth outside of the NQF. The worlds of business are thus not uniform as sources of power for the NQF, but are probably on balance the most positively supportive within the NQF's 'solar system'. This seems to involve relatively little powerplay, an obligatory involvement in the institutional exercise of power, and a constant calculation of the likely advantage of active participation, mere compliance or avoidance of what the NQF offers.

The question of private providers is not dealt with here but in Section 5.5, *The worlds of providers*.

5.4 The worlds of the state

The NQF is an instrument of state and SAQA is an arm of the state. It is commonly assumed that they share in the sovereign majesty of the state and enjoy some of its power. In certain respects this is the case. But the place of the NQF within the state and the relationship of SAQA to the state are complex and compromised. Officially, of course, the position is clear, the commitments on all sides strong. But the reality is different.

The situation is all the more difficult to grasp because the majesty and sovereignty of the state are more than ever open to question. The NQF may, from one point of view, be seen as a function of this lack of certainty about the nature and authority of the state.

In the 20th century three broad views of the state dominated political thinking. The clearest, in theory, was that of the socialist state. Ideally, the dictatorship of the proletariat was intended to lead to a condition in which there was no conflict between individual identity and desires, communal interests and social resources. The powerful centralised state was the final condition for the eventual withering away of the state.

The mixed state (social democratic or social welfare) saw the state as protecting the interests of society by providing those things that capitalism or the market did not happily provide – schooling, health services and a broad range of public infrastructures. These services were seen as creating the foundations for wealth creation by capital and market, enabling and channelling the otherwise amoral energies of capital, and compensating for the harmful effects of capitalism (especially its construction of marginal classes and poverty as sources of labour).[56]

The neo-liberal state in its extreme form, like idealised Marxism, also aspires to the withering away of the state. But instead of the state being replaced by a harmonious and rational order, it will be replaced by the operation of unrestrained, unregulated competition. However, in practice the free market is seen to depend on strong and stable forms of the rule of law, especially the protection of property and the maintenance of an enabling regulatory environment for commerce and the encouragement of consumption. It is averse to positive active provision by the state and is seen to favour low taxation and minimal state intervention.

The government of post-apartheid South Africa inherited a confused mixture of all three of these positions. The mixture of modes was intensified by the nature of the negotiated settlement, which required papering over the cracks between very different approaches. The state was confronted by economic imperatives relating to international debt and pressures for policies to encourage international investment. Yet, at the same time, not only did it take over a state apparatus that was intensely interventionist, but ANC power brought with it decided centralist tendencies from the support it had received from socialist governments and from its affinities with revolutionary movements. However, it is also important to recognise the broad-church character of the ANC, which put unity in the quest for national liberation before the favouring of either bourgeois or working-class ideologies.

Inevitably this has made for a rather more weakened state than those in favour of radical change might have wished for. One of the problems of a weak, broad-church government is that the emphasis can move away from the legitimate exercise of power to powerplay, while the play of power becomes even more difficult to bring to the surface and deal with therapeutically.

The NQF is not only subject to the shifting orientations within the state, but reflects them in itself. It is variously seen as

- a centralising instrument of state power, directing and regulating virtually all provision of education and training that happens in the society
- an agent of the mixed mode of government, regulating, compensating and ensuring provision where it might not otherwise happen
- a front for neo-liberalism, providing a framework for a minimal state role in a regime of largely privatised provision

The state divides into legislature and administration, and the administration divides into the political arm (Cabinet and ministries) and the bureaucracy (government departments), held together by the executive (the Presidency). The NQF has a different history in each of these fields.

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[56] Inasmuch as I understand my own position on this question it is closest to this interpretation, which is based in turn on readings of Habermas and JK Galbraith.

In terms of legislation, the NQF has been subject to what can only be called absent-mindedness. While the SAQA Act was framed and processed with great care, being the first of its kind, subsequent legislation for general education, higher education, further education, adult basic education and human resource development has not been careful about factoring in the entailments of having an NQF. The result has been either a failure to specify powers and delegations or the allocation of the same powers and authority to different bodies. This led to some diminution of SAQA's authority over the NQF, and set the stage for energy-sapping contestation.[57]

It is difficult to know quite why this happened. Confronted by major crises from HIV/Aids to housing, public administration and the arms deal, fiscal policy and so on, it is not surprising that the legislature applied its mind inadequately to the regulation of qualifications in the country. In addition there may have been problems of capacity and experience in the drafting of legislation. Within the NQF and the DoL itself, considerable energies went into the often ingenious framing of the Skills Development Act, so that the implications of other legislation may have been missed. There were certainly opportunities for powerplay and clever tricks by the relevant bureaucracies. This was especially reflected in the insertion of 'deemed' clauses by the DoL. These clauses state that key agencies that are supposed to be accredited by SAQA within the delegations of the NQF must be deemed accredited. Thus Umalusi, with responsibility for the quality assurance of the general and further education bands, is deemed accredited – and therefore ambiguously located in relation to SAQA – while the provincial education departments and schools that Umalusi should technically quality assure are deemed accredited. The implications of these clauses are not uncontested, but since the power of a quality assurance agency lies ultimately in its entitlement to disaccredit a provider, the deemed clauses have served to diminish, quite severely, the authority of the NQF vis-à-vis the DoL. (In the restructured NQF this whole question may fall away.)

In relation to the political arm of the administration, the NQF is essentially a matter of what has been called policy symbolism.[58] It is important to point out that policy symbolism is not contemptible, but a source of power. It becomes problematic when there is no substance behind the symbolism, or where the symbolism belies the reality.

The NQF provided a fairly striking flag of change and renewal in 1995 and embedded in its principles nearly all the most cherished aspirations of the new regime. There is no reason to expect Cabinet to be interested in the intricacies of theory and machinery behind the NQF as long as it receives feedback that the general institution is scoring – or at least not losing – political points. On the whole the Cabinet has been staunchly committed to the continuing existence and success of the NQF, even when the Minister of Education has been thought to be against it. This commitment has included a constant, if never entirely successful, insistence that the Ministries of Education and Labour resolve their differences regarding the NQF. On the other hand, government appears to have been somewhat negligent of the substance behind the symbolism. The initial budgets for SAQA were far below what was needed to carry out the functions specified in the legislation – not that what was needed was clear before the event. This meant that for most of its existence SAQA has been dependent on international donor funding, with some unfortunate consequences for its local access to power and influence.

When we come to the bureaucratic arm of the administration we find an array of issues that have severely undermined the power of the NQF.

As we have seen, a fundamental assumption in the conception of the NQF was that it would operate in relation to a unified Ministry and Department of Lifelong Learning. In the apartheid regime there had been divisive turf wars between a relatively liberal (*verligte*) Department of Manpower and a Department of Education and Training that was seen as a bastion of conservatism. The major disaster in the fortunes of the NQF was the failure of this unification to come about. There were several reasons for this.[59] Firstly, the government of national unity demanded a broadly representative Cabinet. Unification would have meant the loss of a Cabinet position that could be used to satisfy one or other of the interest groups vying for representation or patronage. (In the event, the renamed Department of Labour went to a Minister who had been a distinguished labour leader and was later to become a distinguished Governor of the Reserve Bank, presiding over conservative fiscal policies. Education went to a Minister who was an academic and former head of one of the universities now labelled as 'previously disadvantaged'.) Secondly, key ANC leadership had not been close to the processes of new education policy formation and the appointments of the

[57] Unpacked in Umalusi (2003). Legislation is listed in the Bibliography under Republic of South Africa (RSA) (1995 to 2001).

[58] The term 'policy symbolism' in South African education and training seems to have been coined (or at least deployed with greatest influence) by Professor Jonathan Jansen (Jansen 2002).

[59] The best account of this major setback for the NQF and other aspects of educational transformation is in Lugg (2007). No-one, as far as I know, has expressed in print the sense of distress and disorientation surrounding the non-appointment to leadership positions of many of the main figures in the education and training policy developments before 1994.

Ministers and Director-General of Education were a disappointment to many who had worked for reform and reflected quite different political imperatives. On the whole both the Minister and the Director-General were rooted in profoundly traditional forms of education provision. The old differences between the Department of Manpower and the DET soon reasserted themselves in the new order.

We need now to look at the imperatives of bureaucracy to understand the further disempowerment of the original vision of the NQF.

Bureaucracy has been considered a necessary, indeed essential, component of the democratic state.[60] At its heart is the idea that decisions about the exercise of power are made by due process rather than by whim, personal grace and favour or arbitrary action. Because of its responsibilities, bureaucracy is inherently conservative and focused on the preservation of procedures and routines that have been found to work. The proper exercise of its power gives considerable influence to the imperatives of bureaucracy.

In the transfer of power in 1994 a number of factors came into play that strengthened the bureaucratic imperative, especially in the field of education.

There were the 'sunset clauses' in the settlement, ensuring that the existing bureaucracy would not be summarily fired but, if necessary, phased out. Pretoria had for long been associated with bureaucratic authority. To say that 'Pretoria will not give permission for this or that' was an expression that often gave enormous power to clerks presiding over files in offices where the size of the desk and the right to a carpet were regulated according to the hierarchy. These clerks, and their managers and directors, each functioned according to jealously guarded standard procedures and ways of doing things. There were good experience-based reasons for the standard procedures. A form filled in incorrectly, or wrongly filed or sent to the wrong place, might not only make the clerk's life difficult, but bring extended misery to people out there. As a result, many of the procedures, even those based on perfectly reasonable and humane grounds, became associated with oppression. The bureaucracy was at its most necessary and sometimes, apparently, at its most oppressive, in the administration of public examinations and certification.

Selected comrades from the struggle – from unions, nongovernment organisations (NGOs), civics, schools – found themselves in the old offices in Pretoria taking on the mantle of the incumbents, often learning to come to terms with bureaucratic imperatives the hard way and trying to fit them to new ideal policies that had been formulated far from the daily administration of South African education. There were huge additional challenges. Some 18 segregated departments in provinces and homelands had to be unified into a single nonracial system. The management of a move to greater equity across a system of massive inequalities was a nightmare, adding complex new processes to existing ways. At the same time basic provision had to be maintained and restored. This was pressing not only in the massive school system, involving (by 2007) 26 099 schools, 39 5452 educators and 12,4 million learners.[61] (Among other things, databases, such as they were, were incomplete and inaccurate, creating confusion in planning and opportunities for financial mismanagement or fraud in far-flung regions.) There were also the universities and technikons and technical colleges that fell under education – even while the latter two belonged also within the interests of Labour. On top of this, the settlement required the granting of extensive powers to the provinces. There were, understandably, moments of impotence in the position of the central ministry and department that created an additional anxiety to hold on to authority.

We look again at the DoE as a provider of education in Section 5.5, *The worlds of providers*. As part of the state, the Department became embroiled in a series of differences that were to create something of a sterile distance between them.

The first difference arose around the general position of SAQA. Some architects of the NQF, inasmuch as they had given attention to precise bureaucratic position, had seen SAQA as an autonomous statutory authority operating outside the DoLL[62] and reporting to the MoLL, in something of the same position as the Auditor-General. This was based

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[60] The positive importance of bureaucracy is most famously argued by the German sociologist, Weber. RS Peters (1966) makes an argument for the recognition of the value of bureaucracy in ensuring the execution of rational intentions. The potentially heroic role of the administrator is, according to Trilling's (1940) ambivalent evaluation, an important strand in Kipling's writings. Otherwise bureaucracy is seldom liked and virtually never celebrated.

[61] Figures from 2007 school realities (DoE 2007).

[62] The general trend in this argument is substantially supported by Fataar (2006). The Minister of Education from 1999, Prof Kader Asmal, had, in exile, a celebrated career in law at Trinity College, Dublin. Though not in the UK, this university is historically British and holds a very high rank among English-language universities. Prof. Asmal, who did not hold back his strong opinions, did not like private schools, would fight for racial equity, but clearly valued traditional approaches to curriculum and assessment. Various personal communications from within SAQA and its Board suggest he was experienced as veering between indifference (scarcely polite) and hostility to SAQA, if not to the basic intentions of the NQF.

on a theory that major failings of past education provision had been the result of the fact that provision and evaluation, operations and quality assurance, fell under the same authority. There was a widespread assumption that the inspection and examination systems of the past were not only pedagogically oppressive, but had been used to cover up failings and poor results. SAQA therefore had to be external to the providers.

Given the continuing separation of education and labour, a decision was made to locate SAQA in education as the far larger department. The DoE saw SAQA as a subsidiary service function, akin to the division concerned with the administration of public examinations. For this reason, the salary of the head of SAQA was placed in the hierarchy several notches down from that of the Director-General. This situation caused some disagreement among NQF leaders, some of whom felt they could live with the position proposed by the Department, while others were decidedly opposed because of the diminution in autonomy and status of the agency they had envisaged. The salary notch also effectively limited the range of qualified candidates for the post, or demanded someone with a sacrificial sense of mission.

SAQA soon decided to move into rented offices out of the Pretoria city centre and some distance from 'Schoeman Street' (the location of the Department). While this was portrayed as a practical necessity, it was also perceived on both sides as an assertion of the relative autonomy of SAQA and may be seen as an early point in the erosion of the relationship. SAQA followed the move by securing major funding from the European Union, which had decided that the DoE was a bottomless pit and preferred to fund education and training more closely linked to what was then perceived as a dynamic and focused DoL. In revenge, it seemed – though none of these matters will ever be accessible to the support of clear evidence – the Department initiated a national move to Outcomes-Based Education that in various ways was incompatible with the standards-based approach of the emerging NQF. More seriously, perhaps, the linkage between the country's major qualification – the matric examination, providing access to higher education or school leaving certificates – and the NQF was reduced to little more than an empty gesture. By 2000 the DoE, with an energetic Minister deeply rooted in the elite British university system and with little sympathy for the NQF, was confident of its ascendancy over the DoL. Having undermined the power of the NQF in the whole of the provision of formal education (while adopting some of its practices) the Department was able to set about a process of dismantling the integrated NQF and putting in its place something in its own image.

It is extremely difficult to find concrete evidence for the above account, although it captures the views of a number of key participants at the time. The politics of the time remain profoundly obscure, with personal powerplay having no little part in what happened. The section of the DoE concerned with higher education policy would appear to have been particularly hostile to the NQF.

In SAQA itself, though located separately and with a fresh mission, the bureaucratic imperatives of an arm of state soon asserted themselves. SAQA's position as the top quality assurance agency and its somewhat insecure standing in the order of things necessitated a commitment to a squeaky clean administration, all the more complicated because of its different sources of project funding. But the Executive Officer and the acting Chairperson of the SAQA Board were also strongly committed to the idea that the NQF should not just have moral and professional influence; it should have 'teeth' in the form of detailed and enforceable regulatory structures, mechanisms and operational capacity. In a sense these were implicit in the legislation and in the thinking of NQF leadership beyond the legislation, but were taken forward in a strong form.

With funding and expanding roles SAQA grew quite rapidly, becoming a distinct bureaucracy in its own right. The extent of bureaucratic complexity can be seen in the organisation's guides and organograms.

The shift from passionate vision-driven planning to the bureaucracy of implementation rapidly changed the character of power within the NQF. Many of the enthusiasts – the architects – moved away from the centre of initiative, became consultants trying to keep the original spirit of innovation and inner quality alive, or simply moved away (see Section 6.1, *The small world of NQF enthusiasts*). In their place came officials (some recruited from the original enthusiasts). The first generation was committed to setting up the bureaucratic structures and procedures that would guide and oblige stakeholders and users to follow certain practices. It was followed in turn by officials, often as passionate about their mission as the original architects, who were committed to the transformative ideal, but who were even more committed to the elaboration and implementation of a regulatory regime that rapidly became difficult to change or shift.

In the course of the drama of adoption, location and bureaucratic formation the opportunity for 'policy breadth' in the state was largely lost. Policy breadth means that the principles and practices of the NQF would be adopted in adaptable ways, but even more, would be supported by multiple other developments in government departments, corporations and workplaces. Notably, key assumptions underlying at least some views of the NQF included the existence,

beyond the NQF but in harmony with the NQF, of a major national institute of curriculum development, extensive investments in materials development and distribution, joint large-scale efforts to develop a culture of quality around assessment events, incorporation of complex understandings of standards-based practices in educator training and so on.[63] Although this may have been unrealistic, virtually nothing like this happened. One result was the complaint that 'an NQF on its own cannot bring about change' – a position that few proponents of the NQF ever held, but that seemed to be claimed at times by its advocates.

5.5 The worlds of providers of education and training

In NQF parlance, huge institutions (a provincial education department, a university), intermediate organisations, small private concerns and even individual private tutors fall under the heading of 'providers'. The use of the term may be seen as merely functional, to indicate any source of the delivery of education or training. It has, however, also been seen as part of the neo-liberal move to limit the powers of established institutions and roll back state involvement in provision.

The working of power in the worlds of providers of education and training is full of paradox. Education and training may be the most powerful modern shapers of a nation's future, yet they can seem to make up the least powerful of sectors. In part this is because their impact is slow and difficult to measure (compared, say, with the impact of a malfunctioning national power utility, a falling stock exchange or the failure to control an epidemic). Education and training are expensive and seldom yield quick material profits. In addition, the people who staff the world of education are seen as care-givers and nurturers and the sector is not expected to illustrate striking effects of power.

Within the worlds of providers the paradoxes multiply. Classrooms and training centres constitute worlds within worlds of power that is exercised by teachers and trainers with remarkable levels of autonomy. The effect may be positive or negative, but these almost private worlds – RS Peters' 'holy ground' of the educational encounter – possess highly charged power to change, make or break lives, to bring disciplinary or craft knowledge alive in new contexts or distort it beyond recognition. The demands, requirements and attempts at surveillance of central authorities, however determined, can seem dim from the vantage point of the sites of actual learning. Education departments may depress or frustrate practice or they may encourage it by better resources, support and so on. But on the whole, the policy centre has much less influence than it would like to have over classrooms and training centres. This is a major reason for the difficulty and slowness of centrally-driven intentions to bring about change and improvement.

By the same token, teachers and trainers have relatively little power over the central authorities, which can seem remote, out of touch and irrelevant and may be scarcely known. A teacher or trainer's sense of competence (determined largely by experience) works powerfully against new ideas or requirements from the centre, which often seem counterintuitive. Ideally, major education and training providers constitute organic communities of practice. The top policy makers and administrators are also educators and trainers (or have been). They understand and care about the quality of the world for which they take responsibility. And teachers and trainers see the larger provider as part of a family of common interests and concerns. But it seems almost in the nature of things that the reality should be one of distance and alienation and a broken flow of power.[64]

Higher education institutions are not unaffected by these paradoxes of power. Their status and influence may be far higher than other institutions of learning and they have a certain protection from the power of the national policy centre because of their hallowed autonomy. However, with state prescription of massive institutional restructuring of higher education, funding policy and demands for public accountability in South Africa, serious inroads have been made into aspects of university autonomy. During the time of the NQF's development, universities were under contradictory pressures. There was ongoing central pressure from state funding formulae and dwindling private support. There was policy pressure, especially from the NQF, to focus far more on teaching and learning, curriculum and

[63] In 1997 I wrote an opening address for the conference of the International Association for Educational Assessment, hosted by the IEB in Durban, to be delivered by the Deputy Minister of Education. For the speech I drew on consultations with many NQF enthusiasts, including the Executive Officer of SAQA and the Chairperson of the Board. The speech depicts the NQF as one among many needed and expected developments, and looks at the dangers if certain things were not put in place. It reflects a rather different picture of the NQF than was to emerge under the exigencies and limits of official support and action.

[64] Fleisch (2002) shows the importance of the relationship between central and local management of educational change and improvement, but also how fragile the relationship can be. Fullan (2001) seems more optimistic, but is concerned with contexts where more reliance might be placed on the capacity of local education management cultures.

assessment, while funding undermined this demand in the interest of a much greater favouring of research.[65] At the same time, there were social and international pressures demanding 'responsiveness' (mainly to economic and industrial imperatives) both in teaching and research. In some ways, these pressures required universities to internalise business orientations, something that may have led to a sense of loss of the power of knowledge. Nonetheless, disciplinary traditions and practices, international linkages and standing, and huge differences across forms of knowledge all make it very difficult to impose common central policy. Universities have thus been put into an especially tough position of considering themselves both influential and important leaders of change on the one hand and profoundly disempowered in the face of changes on the other.[66]

In spite of this picture, a major effort has been made in South Africa since 1994 to overcome the distance between policy centres and sites of delivery. The aim has been pursued through participatory development and democratised and devolved structures (especially related to school governance), backed throughout by intensified communication. Yet much of the change in many parts has been less successful than was hoped.

One of the few instruments of power for change that is clearly effective in getting teachers, trainers and academics to work in different ways is the system of assessment, qualifications and certification. The power of qualifications lies in the desire, often the anxiety, of learners to satisfy their requirements. This has a more direct influence than many other measures of central management. It has always been apparent in the impact of the matric examination in South African education. After 11 years of education in the school system that has little reference to a central standard, those learners who have reached this point are galvanised by the centrally prescribed curriculum and assessments as never before. Before the 12th year standards are mediated by teachers and school management in promotion processes, and, before 1994, by panels of school inspectors. This approach made very poor use of the power of qualifications.[67]

A similar but quite separate system has been used for vocational education. The system for the recognition of training before the NQF had few meaningful linkages or pathways between qualifications – in some ways limiting their power. Qualifications were probably used to best effect in shaping desired learning in professional education within higher education. Even in professional faculties, however, there was historically an emphasis on the content of disciplines and practices with little reference to the perspectives of curriculum, pedagogy, assessment theory or considered views of the nature of competence. Problems of validity and justice relating to such qualifications motivated the NQF.

The NQF, as we have seen, has been an effort to use improved approaches to qualification design for its potential influence over providers at the point of delivery. In some major instances, providers have made what they wanted of the NQF: in some cases they evaded many of its requirements, and in others they have been abjectly subject to the system.[68] Yet in all cases, new and more conscious practices have been adopted within different patterns of response, accommodation and resistance by providers.

Providers of education are, even more than other worlds we have looked at, too diverse to be thought of as one world. They are, of course, all linked by a commitment to some form of instruction, but the differences can be overwhelming.

By far the major division is the dichotomy between education and training. There are major differences in thinking about this dichotomy. The most blatant distinction uses the idea that education is what used to be called 'liberal' and training is 'servile' or 'menial'. Education is free of extrinsic pressures. It is 'the thing in itself', concerned with theory, knowledge and the development of character, all for their own sake; the product of education is the ability to exercise judgement flexibly, apply general principles to unique situations and so on. Training, on the other hand, is 'the thing for others, by others': it is specified by the task or technology at hand, tends to be concerned with routine pro-

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[65] SAUVCA (2004) is an outstanding compilation on curriculum responsiveness in higher education. Especially notable is the handling of general issues by Ian Moll.

[66] Badat (2004) provides a tough response from higher education that is open to the challenge of quality assurance but determined to keep it within the control of the universities. Gevers (2001, 2005) was a significant voice on the SAQA Board who mediated between the NQF and higher education in ways that sought to make the NQF work for the universities. See also Cloete et al. (2002) and Enslin et al. (2003).

[67] See King & Van der Bergh (1992).

[68] It should already be clear that the DoE, the HEQC and Umalusi have practised minimal compliance in their relationship with SAQA. Umalusi is a frank advocate of returning to a national curriculum, public examinations and inspectorates for quality assurance in general and further education.

cedures and relatively trivial practical judgements, is located in highly specific contexts and requires basic discipline rather than any refinement of judgement and character.[69] In the British sphere of influence particularly, this dichotomy has been clearly correlated with the class system, with the working classes historically receiving minimal basic education (or training in basic skills) before going on to work as unskilled labourers or in trades (for that they may have received trade-related training). The middle classes, ideally, after a childhood that predisposes them to 'big picture' or decontextualised thinking and to assume ready access to power, receive a thorough and extended humanistic and scientific education, move on into higher education and then into professions.

The problem with the deployment of the dichotomies of education/training, theory/practice, knowledge/skill has been with the anomalies of the boundaries. The reality of the distinction is important: there are real differences in the way that instruction is conducted and outcomes are assessed. But the distinction is not best served by being imposed on specific contexts of learning. The boundaries between education and training are strangely provisional and ultimately extremely porous in actual institutional contexts. From moment to moment a competent educator/trainer will act (probably using unconscious judgements) in an education or training mode. When the distinction is treated as essential or absolute, it falls rapidly into ideological powerplay for sectoral interests: it can be used by trainers to assert a refusal to recognise the need for cognitive depth or by academics in resistance to demands for stronger forms of accountability or responsiveness.

Some counter-examples: training in crafts (as in apprenticeships) can involve immersion in deep, often tacit, integrated wholes of knowledge, skill, character, principles and standards. Changing forms of work can mean that training – including even the controversial workplace-based learning – shifts from fragmented, mechanistic and de-skilled tasks characteristic of the Industrial Revolution (and still the reality in many contexts) to enriched, flexible work involving judgement and requiring a considerable amount of underlying knowledge and theory. Education, on the other hand, entails a considerable amount of training. Even in higher education, claims about the holistic development of critical thinking and independent judgement are often belied by mechanistic pedagogies and curricula that focus substantially on skill (from identifying parts of the anatomy, laboratory techniques, statistical procedures and standard essay-writing skills to being able to parrot the position demanded by a particular lecturer). In turn, claims about whole learning and whole qualifications for whole people throughout education are belied by very frequent resort to practices of what is in effect modular design, with fragmentary, unrelated and unsequenced courses or sections of syllabuses and so on. 'Progression' is a necessary feature of vertical knowledge, but it is extremely difficult to say clearly what is meant by it in many forms of learning, including in higher education. Even in mathematics, assumed to be a model for sequenced growth in insight and competence, progression turns out to be less obvious than one might expect.[70]

The fact that education and training overlap considerably in real contexts of learning (and even in contexts of experiential learning) does not make it easy to integrate them. Conceptual and practical difficulties caused by the dichotomy make defining and giving status to programmes in Vocational Education and Training particularly difficult.[71]

Thus, the distinction between education and training is highly problematic in real contexts of learning. Creating a priori systems for overcoming the distinction, as the NQF has done, can lead to systemic puzzlement, and the more detailed the pre-emptive specification the more difficulties come into being. There are major conundrums for policy makers here when situations demand rapid symbolic and real change, as was the case in South Africa after 1994. Wisdom might have dictated that the change be made in terms of a slow gradualism, building on what was already there – both cultures and systems – and nurturing the values of the NQF into life through what has been called a framework of communication. However, political imperatives seemed to demand another wisdom –that a strict and coherent system of enforceable regulations be developed as quickly as possible from an authoritative centre (with maximum stakeholder participation and consent, and mechanisms for articulation, so that the system would not be

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[69] This account of the commonly understood differences between education and training summarises the positions of numerous entries on this topic on the Internet. (The favourite illustration of the difference is to ask how you would react to being told your child was being given sex training instead of sex education. In common accounts, there tends to be a general recognition of the overlaps and commonalities between education and training.)

[70] See Muller (2006) for an important discussion of the question of progression. The observation about mathematics comes from deliberations reported by Hallendorff regarding the problems of progression in the new subject called 'maths literacy', and of differentiating it from mathematics proper.

[71] The difficulty of clarifying the nature of vocational education is made very clear in Barnett's (2006) important analysis of the matter.

brittle). In effect, it was the second form of wisdom that seemed necessary to SAQA. In many respects difficulties in implementation were anticipated, and it was felt that they could be overcome by accommodation along the way.[72]

It was difficult to anticipate the strength of resistance or avoidance by providers. There were two closely related reasons for this. The first was the representation of providers – which marginalised major education structures and institutions of learning – in the process of developing the NQF before it was legislated in 1995, and the limited and shifting bias of representation once the NQF was set in motion. The second was the consequent failure of NQF development to be closely related to how things were actually done 'out there'. This was not only because of poor representation and political protection of turf (see Section 5.4, *The world of the state*), but because of a certain revolutionary element in the thinking of NQF leadership. This could be expressed as 'We have neither the desire to take the disgraceful legacies of apartheid education and training into account in making a new system work, nor the time.'

Institutions are necessarily characterised by inertia. Even dynamic institutions need continuity, institutional memory and embedded practices. Specialists experienced in curriculum change warned of years of slow approval and implementation of innovations, and pointed to features of existing provision that were valuable and necessary regardless of their association with apartheid education.[73] A notable example is the matric examination. Early in the post-apartheid era there was unusual consensus that the matric examination would die – indeed, the Minister of Education declared its demise. The NQF looked to an entirely different system of modular, unit standard-based qualifications for all sectors at Levels 1 to 4. Universities argued that the matric was fairly useless for candidate selection and that other instruments would be preferable. Business felt matric was of little value in providing useful higher skills. Yet in 2008, 14 years after the revolution, the matric examination changed its name and aspects of its curriculum and assessment design. It is unlikely to change its fundamental nature and its high-stakes status in the popular imagination. The institution of matric is deeply embedded in the popular and professional understanding of what constitutes education in South Africa – not without good reasons – and cannot easily be expunged.

Given the dynamics of power outlined above, it might have taken feats of broad sectoral solidarity to represent the provider sector. But, unlike the unions, business and the state, this sector had no overall structure of representation, and only weak structures for representation in sub-sectors.

The landscape of the provider stakeholders of the NQF in the period of its conceptualisation and design consisted especially of:

- new coordinating Industry Training Boards (ITBs) in each productive sector, with central representation through the National Training Board (NTB) in the Department of Manpower (the voice of employers was stronger than workers in the ITBs, while providers were generally peripheral)
- the world of direct education and training provision in the workplace, including
    - major industrial providers especially in larger corporations – in commerce, industry and especially in the mines and parastatals (like Eskom, Iscor, Sasol)
    - private providers servicing these and smaller concerns with specialised skills in training and adult literacy and basic education
- Institutional providers specifically serving the world of work, mainly
    - newly created, ambitious but problematic Regional Training Centres, aimed especially at short courses for those in search of employment
- formal education institutions falling then under the central Department of National Education (DNE), including
    - most closely, the Technical Colleges (in other countries called Technical High Schools)
    - technikons (tertiary institutions providing higher technical and vocational diplomas, but then already under pressure to become degree-awarding bodies)
    - universities, most especially their engineering faculties. ('From sweeper to engineer' was a common union slogan in the development of the NQF, emphasising the need for progression and portability of learning credits)

Some of these agencies informed the process of training policy development closely in the early years. The NTB

[72] Discussions with SAQA leadership around 1997 contained a repeated commitment that it would be irresponsible to create a 'toothless' NQF. (The idea of what came to be called a 'framework of communication' was expected to have virtually no impact, given the tough legacy of attitudes and practices that had to be overcome.)

[73] Clive Talbott, who had run a respected provincial examinations board and set up the IEB's formal public examinations system, repeatedly expressed scepticism at the hopes of rapid change to the curriculum and assessment systems in the years of policy development before 1994. His practical awareness of the procedures and requirements for credible curricula and assessment turned out to be prophetic in many respects.

took the initiative in new training policy, and after 1990 provided the space for labour and business to shape future policy. The ITBs, though perceived to be performing poorly in general, ran various developmental projects. Several involved the innovative implementation of competency-based curriculum design. (The idea of 'outcomes' in the NQF was adopted because of objections to the trivialisation of this approach, especially in its manifestation in the building industry. In the long term the ITBs were to form the basis of the much more powerful SETAs.) Private providers were influential way beyond their size as enthusiastic marketers of their instructional innovations in this world.

The experience of the Regional Training Centres suggested that short-term training (typically, in bricklaying and basic welding) was too little, and led nowhere if it was not linked both to immediate application and to related life-skills and cognitive development – and ultimately to recognised qualifications structures.

It was probably the situation of technical colleges that aroused most concern. Apart from their low status or appeal compared to academic secondary schools, their curriculum was seen as profoundly unsatisfactory (something experienced equally in other parts of the English-speaking world). Their standard curriculum (known as N1, N2 and N3, with N3 being an inferior technical matric) seldom offered access to tertiary education. Worse still, the slowness of curricular practice and provision meant that the knowledge and techniques taught were not responsive to change. Inasmuch as they serviced apprenticeships, the linkage of their theory to the practice was often considered low in relevance. Technikons were more responsive in curriculum and delivery, but were less central to the picture.

The universities showed little interest in the NQF in the early stages, seeing themselves as having little to do with skills or training.[74] However, some specialists from higher education were closely consulted in the process of developing the NQF. Unions, business and innovative providers were critical of the universities' relevance. They made much use of a cartoon depicting a conventional beggar labelled 'unemployed' and a university graduate labelled 'unemployable'. Much was made of the apparently unreflective practices of higher education in curriculum development, assessment and certification. The reality of peer review was seen as weak and potentially corrupt. (There have been considerable but uneven improvements of focused attention to these issues since the creation of the NQF.)

On the whole, although providers were invited to send representatives to the shaping workshops of the NTSI, these representatives were largely spectators of the jousting of labour and business leaders. As spectators, they were often positively appreciative of the backroom and late-night work being put into the architecture of the NQF. Even if they had been inclined to object, they would seldom have had behind them a base of clear interests to refer to. An exception was the representation of the then DNE, speaking especially for official technical and higher education. As educators rather than trainers, they were concerned about ensuring a system that would allow for a holistic view of learning, and were worried about the potential for fragmentation in standards-based design. They were also troubled about how standards-based development could work in the technical colleges, being aware of the special challenges of curriculum development in that sector. However, they were won over by the breadth of educational vision of the champions of the NQF and the possibility for flexible implementation.

This slightly uneasy acceptance was not supported by the Committee of Technical College Principals, who were very much aware of the difficulties of constructing working relationships with industries while running a fixed national curriculum. For a whole range of reasons, in processes outside the NTSI, they expressed considerable anxiety about how the NQF could work for them.[75]

The role and interest of the alternative adult education sector (NGOs) at this time was not without influence on the NQF. The sector was small, but influential because of its principled innovations and, above all, its position on the moral high ground of education. It was ambivalent about the NQF (having a tradition of resistance to credentialism or 'banking education'). But the need to give formal standing to learning achievements in adult education was felt with some urgency, as well as the potential of being able to link adult learners into extended learning pathways – at least those adult learners who saw this as their need.[76]

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[74] In French (2004a) I provide an account of my experience as the representative of the then Committee of University Principals (CUP) to Working Group 2 of the NTSI that created the blueprint for the NQF.

[75] In 1995 the IEB hosted a workshop to which technical college (now part of the FET Colleges) leaders were invited. There can be little doubt that the greatest anxiety, uncertainty and disbelief about the NQF was articulated by this sector. Perhaps because they were in the difficult terrain of vocational education and knew the tough side of 'integration', they were not easy to persuade that the NQF would be a good thing.

[76] For an understanding of the position and concerns of this sector, see various chapters in Hutton (1992).

Until the legislation of the NQF the flow of power from the world of providers was weak and fragmented. There was little powerplay, unclear connection to underlying sources of power, and relatively low levels of the institutional or official exercise of power. However, by the time of the legislation, the landscape of influence and power among providers was changing rapidly. More important, the NQF had grown dramatically in its ambition, and now encompassed all of learning, not just workplace, technical and vocational education and training. This was to set in motion a whole new dynamic.

The growth in scope might have been implicit in the principles of the NQF, but some of its founding enthusiasts saw dangers in the imposition of comprehensiveness over all education provision. An unspoken assumption of comprehensiveness was that generous stakeholder participation would lead to the creation of broad communities of trust. As we have seen, stakeholder participation was built into each function of the NQF. In the event, the distrust, sometimes hostility, between stakeholder groupings was insuperable, until some effectively withdrew from serious participation.[77] The structuring of stakeholder participation created a particular sense of grievance among providers. In the first place, providers in general continued to be a decided minority within the stakeholder structures (although business and labour, for example, might themselves be represented by individuals with strong provider backgrounds). Within the minority representation, the huge players like the DoE resented having no greater vote than the NGO sector or the representatives of private providers. Within the representation there was minimal support for expertise in curriculum, assessment or skills development unless this happened to coincide with the representation of a sector.

One of the most striking features of education in the late 1990s was the decline of the influence of 'alternatives' – the vibrant movement of NGOs that felt that they were shaping the future towards the end of the apartheid regime. The decline came about through the withdrawal of much international funding and its redirection into 'bilateral' support for the state. However, three or four years into the new government, major donors felt frustrated by the perceived inefficiencies, difficulties with accountable use of project funding and powerplay within the DoE. At the time, the DoL seemed much more focused. SAQA was to benefit from this shift, as many European donors especially favoured the intentions of the NQF.[78] The decline of the alternative NGOs was also encouraged by the official education sector. Although many former NGO members had become officials in this sector, there was a tendency to see the NGOs as diminishing the power of the state to direct change.[79] With the loss of the anti-apartheid high ground, rapidly diminishing funding and reduced leadership, many NGOs started to look as though they deserved their declining fortunes. The more successful transformed, in effect, into private providers required to operate as businesses, albeit ostensibly nonprofit businesses.

After 1999 the division of the DoE concerned with higher education, backed by the Minister of Education, seemed actively to seek a reduction in SAQA's power and in the scope and structure of the NQF.[80] For years SAQA struggled to obtain adequate state funding that would lessen its dependence on donors. There are suspicions that the limbo was deliberately constructed. In various ways, legislation turned the whole public provision of learning into virtually empty formalism. As we have seen, the hierarchical relationship of the two Quality Councils and their band ETQAs to SAQA was blurred, decidedly diminishing SAQA's power to determine directions. In turn, the power of Umalusi in relationship to its main constituency – the public schooling system – was made one of indirect influence only. Even the FET colleges, key to the NQF, were to be held at arm's length. The colleges had historically provided programmes guided mainly by national curriculum regulations, but had also been responsive to specific industries and offered courses linked to industrial and commercial needs with no official status. The institution of learnerships created possibilities for funded instruction that articulated with qualifications, but this meant that the FET colleges would need to engage with NQF requirements. Although the official national curriculum was registered on the NQF in terms of 'whole qualifications', the mixed modes added to the perpetual crisis of vocational curriculum.

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[77] Views of several members of the initial SAQA Board and early SAQA staff confirm that instead of creating a community of trust, the implementation of the NQF was nearly defeated by the levels of distrust across stakeholders.

[78] In 1997 I was approached by a funding project officer of the EU in Pretoria to advise on the direction of their funding as they were required to move it into bilateral agreements. This observation comes from our meetings.

[79] Although the hostility to NGOs was not explicit policy, and although extensive reliance was placed on various public/private partnerships, a broad intent to dispense with NGOs was expressed in private by some officials. Whatever the official position, by the new millennium the once-vigorous NGO movement was dwindling rapidly – 'decimated' is an understatement.

[80] Interviews with disenchanted high-level members of SAQA reveal that they pulled out because they despaired of the NQF working. Obstruction by officials within the DoE was cited and seemed closely related to the related financial insecurity of SAQA, which reached crisis point in 2004.

The setting in motion of what was to be some seven years of policy deliberation left the NQF in a structural limbo. In this process, the institutions of learning had a certain revenge for their marginalisation. Academics had a much more significant voice in the inquiries and took a leading role in shaping a restructured NQF that was, in effect, to be severely limited in its comprehensiveness, prescriptiveness or pretensions to integration.

An ironical result of the diminishing involvement of the official providing sector, business and labour in the workings of the NQF from the late 1990s was the rise in influence of the private-provider sector and its interests. This sector was greatly empowered by the sudden huge possibility of funding through the Skills Levies Act. The situation was dominated by paradox, however. The SETA ETQAs were relatively awash with money. Meanwhile SAQA, which needed the capacity to accredit and guide these ETQAs, and even more to supervise the creation and management of the qualifications that the ETQAs needed to quality assure, was strapped for cash. The advantaging of private providers was also a mixed blessing. The raft of emerging qualifications created unprecedented opportunities for instructional entrepreneurs. Yet new provision put in place such stringent and complex requirements for registration, accreditation, approval, recognition of qualifications and so on, that the lives of private providers have not been easy. The difficulties multiply if the provision has some relationship to a learnership. Simply understanding and negotiating the system from the point of view of a private provider is daunting. Management Information System and Quality Management System maintenance plus reporting requirements can sink a new small instructional entrepreneur, while larger providers in some cases avoid offering registered qualifications and teach only to the contributing unit standards.

Thus, ironically, through both exclusion and over-representation the world of providers has probably not, overall, enhanced the power of the NQF.

6. THE POWER OF OUTER PLANETARY INFLUENCES

6.1 The small world of NQF enthusiasts[81]

In the early 1990s the small circles of NQF insiders in the trade unions and business expanded to include a slightly wider leadership who became the envisagers, planners, architects and evangelists of the NQF. These individual enthusiasts came from different orientations, though all were concerned with adult learning in one form or another. Apart from the unions and business, they came from the worlds of industrial training boards, private providers and adult education (NGOs, private providers and academic contexts). They generally had influential voices in their fields, but only one or two might in any sense be called power brokers.

What is intriguing about the expanded inner circle is that, virtually without exception, its members had backgrounds in the humanities. Most had been, or were still in some way, students and teachers of language and literature with records of some distinction in these fields. At least two had theological and pastoral backgrounds and two had backgrounds in maths and science, but in educational rather than disciplinary or technological fields.

It is difficult to know what to make of this observation, but since those in the group in all their personal diversity were powerful advocates of the idea of the NQF – or perhaps of very different ideas of the NQF – some speculation on the fact may be fruitful.

The first observation that comes to mind is that the early NQF enthusiasts were an unlikely group to be generating what various academics soon branded a reductive and behaviourist system. They had a lively sense of the importance of language, culture, values, critical thinking and cognitive depth in most forms of learning. They also valued the flexible responsiveness of critical and interpretive disciplines, rather than the application of rigid formulae to problems. All of these aspects were part of the enduring legacy of influential older schools of criticism (notably that of FR Leavis[82]). They would also, however, have been touched to a greater or lesser degree by the introduction of forms of ideology critique or critical hermeneutics to the understanding of the ambiguities of culture, language and literature in the construction of racial and colonial power structures. In addition, some would have been influenced at least indirectly by the wave of progressive approaches to language, literature and cultural studies that entered parts of South African education from the UK from the late 1960s.

This meant that their intent, far from aiming at the reduction of rich cognitive domains to narrow skills, was to give power to the fullest notions of competence. To skills development they wanted to bring the essential dimensions of knowledge, understanding and values. To the pursuit of knowledge they wanted to add a sense of the value of the higher disciplines in the world of work. There was a determined sense, from their own experience, that the arts and the humanities had important gifts to bring to management and leadership.

The humanities, language studies and literature in particular are full of affirmations of the dignity and struggles of ordinary people, their resourcefulness in surviving, their pain in the face of privilege and discrimination and the validity of their language and their voices. They also contain celebrations of craft and skill. These aspects had been emphasised in the influential revisionist studies that made a dramatic impact in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s[83]. Emancipation from the unconscious cultural justification of class and race oppression was an insistent theme in these orientations. In addition there was a positive move to give value to everyday and indigenous knowledges. These were issues for which the NQF held important promise (see Section 4.1.1, *The centripetal force of the canonical narrative*.)

By the 1980s in South Africa it had become difficult for some of this group to sustain a sense of relevance, working in the humanities in sheltered and privileged environments of education. At the same time they would have found it

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81 This section draws largely on my personal acquaintance with many of those involved. The enthusiasts I have in mind were, for example, members of the NTSI Working Group 2 in 1993, those who came together to draft the legislation, the team who came together to compose *Ways of seeing the NQF*, which could be seen as a crystallising moment in the development of the NQF (HSRC 1995), and many on the first SAQA Board.

82 Leavis remains a vivid figure. He represents an intense demand for authenticity, was a dissenter and outsider in the academic world of Cambridge, supported what might be seen in some ways as a conservative and fiercely guarded canon of English literature, and, like his friend and colleague Wittgenstein, was critical of a belief in defining one's procedures, rather than doing and showing them – notably in his response to Welleck's demand that Leavis should make his critical assumptions transparent (see Walsh 1980).

83 A range of influential revisionist historians could be listed here. Perhaps most relevant to this statement are Bundy (1979), Van Onselen (1882), Guy (1983), Willan (1984) and Marks (1986). But there is a significant number of related studies from the same period.

politically and ethically problematic to contribute to the future through employment in official education provision. Most had therefore migrated into positions as activists or into different nongovernment contributions to education and training.

All of the NQF enthusiasts had experienced the privilege of job mobility made possible by their qualifications and positioning, and could readily imagine a world in which people were not locked into positions because of contingencies of experience and training.

On the negative side, one might take account of the common experience of idealistic humanities graduates that, in Auden's words, 'poetry makes nothing happen'[84]. This might have encouraged turning to a faith in management systems in the quest for more concrete effects than seemed to be produced by a faith in words and ideas. In addition, many of the NQF enthusiasts had worked in projects that attempted to inject transformed practices or content into the provision of education, only to find that even the most enthusiastic uptake could be defeated by the dominance of the system – and particularly by the nature of official assessment and certification. A significant proportion of the NQF enthusiasts would have counted themselves anti-credentialists, with no love of qualifications per se. However, various influences encouraged them to see the potential instrumentality of a reformed qualifications system.

The experience of intensely unreliable and often thoughtless modes of assessment was common in literature and the arts in higher education.[85] Some variability may be inescapable, but before the NQF the marks on an English literature essay were as likely as not to be the product of the whim and the mood of the marker.

Only a minority of NQF enthusiasts had a gift for powerplay, and only a handful later found themselves in positions to exercise formal powers in the interests of the NQF. But they were, collectively, articulate presenters, persuasive writers and effective activists, and they often had a sense of urgency and passion about what they were doing. By contrast with the other general good and progressive policy intentions for the future of education in South Africa, what they had to offer was focused, specific and promising.

Postscript:

By 2000 many of the original enthusiasts for the NQF had moderated or abandoned their enthusiasm as the implications and shape of implementation became clearer. The new enthusiasts were the expanding number of appointed employees in SAQA, the SETAs and the Band ETQAs, training managers in corporations and a range of private providers delivering training in understanding the NQF or in conducting assessment. Their passion for the NQF was very different, and has for the most part focused on their command of the operational specifics of the NQF, and of managing compliance to established procedures – matters that interest only a few of the old guard.

The original band of NQF enthusiasts was highly informed about issues. Current critiques sometimes imply that this awareness was lacking. The problem was not one of ignorance, but of the limited power of awareness in contexts of great pressure for change that demand sharp trade-offs. The following matrix offers an overview of the issues of concern to the original enthusiasts, and of the difficulty of acting on that awareness:

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[84] In Auden's 1939 tribute *In Memory of WB Yeats*, written in 1939.

[85] At least three enthusiasts that I know of had critiques of the unreliability of higher education assessment practices after analysing their variability.

Awareness at the time of the original design of the NQF	Why this awareness had limited effect
1. Those leading the design of the NQF knew very well that solutions to deep educational and related social problems are neither quick nor easy.	On the whole the NQF took vastly longer to take shape and have an impact than its original proponents thought possible. In part, because nearly all of them had been excluded from processes of policy and curriculum change in the past, they may have been naï ve about the rigours of implementation. However, a mix of political factors was to slow progress. Stakeholder participation, demands and mutual suspicion in particular seem to have contributed to the growth of complexity in the model, which has compromised implementation.
2. Education and training may play a powerful role in change, but not a leading role: research and experience show that social, cultural, political and economic factors are intertwined, and probably have priority, when education is used as an instrument for change.	There was an assumption at the beginning that the NQF would be a lean instrument exercising leverage and influence over many expected innovations and within marriages or relationships with other sectors and institutions. In many cases these failed to materialise. There were, however, considerable differences of opinion about whether the NQF would be directive and prescriptive, or enabling and developmental.
3. Responsiveness to local and sectoral particularities is vital for change to succeed. Success on any scale is impossible without widely-distributed leadership that grasps the essential principles, understands what is at stake and has the authority, resources and freedom to exercise judgement in local and sectoral contexts. This is perhaps the most difficult to achieve.	Capacity has been a problem well beyond what the original proponents imagined. The effects of apartheid on education, experience and confidence have worked against success, and have been exacerbated by the extent to which talent has flowed out of education into business. The ramifications of the NQF skills crisis have encouraged resorting to prescriptive approaches and compliance-oriented implementation where local leaders lack confidence, or where their judgement must be doubted.
4. By the same token, the idea, emphasised by the NQF, that there are points of commonality (such as a problem-solving orientation) in all acts of learning is seductive and not without reason. But there are limits to the usefulness of the idea, which also seems to be easily trivialised. The major differences between forms of knowledge, including their acquisition and application, must be asserted.	The assumption of commonalities across forms of learning, though envisaged as flexible at the highest levels of planning, generated resistance for both valid and inappropriate reasons in different sectors. The view that an epistemological model inappropriate to certain sectors was being imposed created much misunderstanding and allowed a certain play of academic malice. There seems to have been a failure of public relations for the NQF, so that high-level awareness could not overcome damaging simplifications, such as the repeated assertion that 'the NQF is behaviourist'.
5. Some leaders of the early NQF concept were highly conscious that there are elements of autonomy in learning and knowledge, necessary aspects of freedom that resist integration or reduction to responsiveness or application. The instrumentality of knowledge is of considerable importance, both in application and in contexts dedicated specifically to learning. But knowledge for its own sake and in its own right is also of considerable importance. Knowledge that is tacit, or that has more affinity with play than with the world of work, or that aspires beyond its ties with practicality, is often a profounder source of competence than narrow task-oriented learning.	Although the original expert proponents of the NQF had complex humanistic views of the roots of competence, which included generous valuing of disciplinary knowledge and cultural and personal development, elements of the NQF design lent themselves to superficial views (encouraged by less sophisticated advocates of the NQF) that the NQF stood for reductionist, mechanistic and fragmented approaches to learning. Though little could have been further from the intention, the opposition was single-mindedly pursued by some academics who saw the machinery of public accountability in the NQF as a threat to academic freedom and an intrusion on the autonomy of institutions.

6.	Quality institutions of learning of all kinds are of the greatest importance. But not only is there a damaging variability of quality across institutions of the same ostensible status, the legacy of structures and institutions is quite inadequate for the variety and range of learning that should be recognised both for equity and efficiency in SA. Institutions could thus not be the primary source of the credibility of NQF qualifications, and the dominance of universities in defining the boundaries of nearly all certificated or recognised knowledges was felt to be unsatisfactory.	This position elicited ferocious opposition from within the formal general and higher education sectors. The opposition, though perhaps not widespread, was powerfully positioned and highly articulate. This has led to a quite unnecessary level of undialectical polarisation and uneasy accommodations, and ultimately to a reshaping of the NQF from a unifying intention to a sectorally fragmented and loosely articulated structure. It may be possible that the management of SAQA was too much in awe of higher education when it might have supported labour visionaries in asserting the validity of forms of knowledge not directly linked to schooling or the academic world. What has become clear is that the question of the definition of knowledge in our society is almost intractably complex.
7.	The idea of an integrated system or approach was recognised as complex and challenging. In no sense was integration conceived as denying the reality or validity of differentiation or the importance of progression. Rather there was a celebration of differentiation, of the varieties of forms of learning deserving of recognition. There was some disagreement over whether a more loosely articulated approach would be preferable to a unified approach, but few at the time favoured a tracked approach.	All sorts of unanticipated opposition to aspects of the idea of integration arose. The structural blow of the failure to amalgamate the competing apartheid empires of education and manpower in one Department of Lifelong Learning was perhaps fatal to the full intent. In a context where training leaders saw training in terms of complex learning, official education and academic leaders set up positions that at times seemed to emphasise irreconcilable differences between education and training. In a scarcely veiled way, they portrayed training (and skills and everyday knowledge) as necessarily trivial and incompatible with the vertical progression that alone was worthy of recognition and certification. To some extent, the training sector responded by acting in ways that confirmed the caricature.
8.	The sources of competence and creativity were never conceived of as reducible to simplistic specifications. Outcomes and standards were, on the contrary, meant to allow openness to whatever was needed to develop the outcome – whether this was to be steeped in tacit knowledge and the canons of disciplines, or rigid mechanistic training. The outcome was essentially a tool for clarifying the end assessment. There was also no sense that the nature of knowledge or competence was capable of absolutely transparent specification; the notion of transparency was invoked against the mystification of policy and curriculum processes. In no sense is a standards-based approach meant to specify fragmented processes as in lock-step versions of competence-based modular training, but major commentators have stated this to be the case.)	The creation of standards has led to widespread participation in decisions about the nature of education and training, in more consciousness of purpose, and in some areas better and more accountable provision. However, in implementation the idea of the specification of standards for end assessment could seem counter-intuitive in a culture used to the specification of input and content. Unsophisticated official use of the idea led to the specification being used as an illegitimate substitute for curriculum. Forms of specification useful in industry seemed alien in some academic contexts. Some institutions and disciplines saw specification as an inappropriate demand for accountability. In general, regular reporting of assessment against outcomes may in some cases have intruded on time and energy that would have been used better for provision.
9.	Some of the original proponents of the NQF believed passionately that it would focus strictly on the validity of the credit solely as output. In other words it would be preoccupied with assessment and the broad curriculum that informed the assessment, but would rigorously avoid engaging with the quality of inputs. This was far from saying that	In some respects the worst nightmares of this group seem to have been realised, with a labyrinth of accreditation requirements in the bigger system and a highly unsatisfactory implementation in reality of the training and use of assessors. This has led to perceptions (not without justification) of our NQF as cumbersome, interfering and yielding assessments with low levels of relia-

inputs were not important – but they were the responsibility of other agencies. It would be challenging enough for SAQA to require the development of better practices in assessment, and especially in relation to the idea of an exit assessment. Real improvement here was considered to be the best leverage via qualifications for improved quality. Those who supported this idea had a horror of involvement with the policing of inputs (the proper domain of education departments and professional bodies). There was to be no place in the NQF for approval of programmes or accreditation of providers.	bility – particularly on the general education side. This happened partly because focusing on and managing assessment proved problematic when going to scale across various sectors. Partly it had to do with the category mistakes discussed elsewhere in this study, where, for example, approaches suitable to one sector were applied to all sectors (until resistance led to greater flexibility).

6.2 The world of qualifications

6.2.1 Overview: power, social order and qualifications

This section looks at the role of being qualified and qualifications as a beneficial part of the social order, but one that is also tied up with power and that might at times be described as a bearer of structural violence. Historic uses of qualifications and earlier frameworks (qfs – see Footnote 41) in South Africa are sketched, with an invitation to reflect on the shaping power of personal and family qualification frameworks. But qualifications are not merely structured by the play of power. A proviso is offered about the power and structure of knowledge 'in its own right', if not necessarily for its own sake.[86]

As we have seen, the NQF came into being in 1990. But if there were no NQFs as such before then, there certainly were implicit, mostly unacknowledged, nqfs or at least qfs from the beginning of intelligent life. They were not necessarily institutionalised or even conscious, but there can be no doubt that they were there.

Animal qualifications frameworks

Even the animal world could be said to have qfs. From bees to bears, forms of complex life have genetic rules or codes[87] that assign appropriate roles and behaviours. The more complex the community, the less these codes are rigidly prescribed and the more they are related to learned practices. At this point sets of codes may be seen as frameworks that allow space for different ways of interpreting and assigning roles and behaviours, for individual reactions and innovations.

Any regular viewer of the programme *50/50*[88] will have seen many pictures of animals miraculously carrying out the patterns prescribed by their genes and their collective experience, but also testing the limits of these patterns as they take up the challenges of new contexts. When they test the limits, they take individual risks and often challenge holders of power, ultimately fighting with the top dog. We now know that gender, physical strength, plumage, rituals, the ability to build the best nest and so on all play important roles as members of animal communities establish their qualifications. In periods of change and uncertainty, when it is no longer clear who is really in charge of allocating or playing roles, there are inevitably fights.

People, position, power and knowledge

These matters become much more complex, interesting and dangerous in human society. Even relatively simple human societies enact complex codes in deciding who is qualified to lead, protect, guard, heal, provide spiritual guid-

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[86] In French (1990) I argued against the extreme instrumentalist position of 'functional literacy' which holds that one cannot promote adult literacy 'for its own sake'. My position was that while literacy must be located in context, it had dimensions peculiar to itself – hence my invocation of the expression 'not for its own sake, but in its own right'.

[87] The notion of rules underlying governing codes may have its origins in Chomsky's grammar or Lé vi-Strauss's anthropology. However, it is also strengthened by discoveries around DNA. The notion of codes guiding educational choices and practices is central to Basil Bernstein's influential sociology of education, and is used by Muller. Codes can be seen as sets or patterns of underlying rules (that may be explicit or unconscious, or a mix of these) that guide our behaviour, including our language, learning and modes of interaction.

[88] A popular, long-running weekly programme about nature and conservation on SABC TV2.

ance, placate the gods or care for the ancestors. Sometimes a combination of gender, age and the completion of rituals makes a person qualified. A heroic deed or a spiritual gift may accredit[89] an individual for higher roles. Perhaps the most careful attention is given to those who have the special gifts of going out of the cave into the light to bring back some transforming truth, to use Plato's enduring allegory. Qualifications are both tickets for viewing the light outside and rewards for coming back with useful news. At the same time, it is a commonplace that Plato's philosopher kings would happily have ruled over a stratified society serviced by slaves. The lottery of birth into a class or caste decided who got tickets to the light. But the slaves had skills the kings lacked, and they could rise and sometimes change the order violently. At that point they would probably discover that the knowledge and positional rituals needed to rule were very different from the knowledge needed to make and fix things.[90]

Myths of origin already illustrate the conflict-ridden marriage of knowledge and power. In stories we have told ourselves through the ages, the ambiguities within both power and knowledge are rampant. Whether carnal (one view of Adam and Eve's transgression) or intellectual (another view of Adam and Eve's transgression, depending on how one views the serpent and the tree) or prophetic (throughout the Old Testament) or questioning the authority of received beliefs and practices (Socrates), knowledge is both empowering and to be feared. Knowledge may defeat death and plumb the depths of hell, destroying its infernal power. But science and technology, which arm humankind against raw nature and destiny so that they compete with the kings of the universe, entail heavy costs. The fates of Orpheus and Prometheus are vivid in this respect. Throughout mythology and literature, to know is to transgress. Knowledge is both comforting and dangerous. It is comforting because it puts us more in control of our space and helps us to understand those things we can't control, and because it exercises faculties that we were made to exercise. It is dangerous because in finding it we challenge the gods – we move in on their jealously guarded turf – and then we turn its power on one another.

In Foucault's theory, knowledge and power are inseparable. They produce one another reciprocally. For him the production of new knowledge typical of the Enlightenment is not innocent, but must be aligned with corporate, disciplinary and administrative power.[91]

Qualifications, power and the division of labour in South Africa

Luckily for us, the vicious fights around qualifications are mostly sublimated or politely hidden. There should be no doubt, though, that the struggles are still there, and that power is nearly always at stake. But though there are nearly always contests for priority, privilege and access to powerful roles, they are hidden in the elaborate rituals and plumage amply displayed at most graduation events.

While this may appal those of us who prefer collaboration and strive for authenticity (knowledge or arts for their own sake, what really matters), it is probably unwise to ignore the play of power in knowledge, or to see it as evil rather than a necessary component of life-giving processes. Role allocation and division of labour are key processes in the working of human societies. While it is possible to imagine societies where these happen in gentle and benign ways, such societies are rare Arcadias of conservatism. Their inhabitants happily accept their place, and share in the glory of the king as they hew wood and carry water. The picture is not attractive to modern individuals. Not only is it static and artificial, it also masks powers and structures. We have seen how this discourse could be used to justify oppression in South Africa – most notably in Verwoerd's notorious justification of Bantu Education in 1953.

The complexity of role allocation in modern society is vividly illustrated in the following example. In an effort to prioritise skills, a comprehensive catalogue of coded occupations has recently been published. It lists 4 580 occupations apparently necessary for the functioning of our society.[92] They range from legislator to seafood farmer and railways yard master, from curriculum advisory officer to ballet teacher. Within these fields there are many grades of expertise and seniority. We must be grateful that people in our society no longer find themselves in these roles mainly because of their colour, or their language, or because they were of lowly birth. Yet there are, and perhaps always

[89] Christ and St Paul in the New Testament refer to themselves as 'accredited'.

[90] This is a crude summary of Hegel's intricate dialectic of master and serf in Hegel (1977). An intensely concentrated reflection on the dialectic of political power and knowledge can be found in Yeats's *Leda and the swan*. See also Berger & Luckman (1984) for an influential study of the social construction of knowledge.

[91] This point is stressed by Keevy (2005) in his discussion of Foucault's thinking as a resource for understanding the NQF.

[92] In 2007 the DoL published the *Organising Framework for Occupations* (OFO) to facilitate and rationalise the collection of information about the labour market and its needs. This was especially needed to assist Joint Initiative on Priority Skills Acquisition (JIPSA). The OFO uses a frame of eight levels, from manager and professional down to 'elementary workers'.

will be, arbitrary aspects to the destiny of individuals. All sorts of things create an individual's personal qualifications framework (pqf), the set of opportunities and constraints that determine how you develop your knowledge and where you can go with it.

These factors include where you were born, how much your parents believed in you, what they believed about the things you were destined to do, who your mother knew, which club your uncle belonged to, your health in your matric year, the economic crisis just when you were choosing a career, how close you were to power … or as some post-modernist thinkers would put it, which discourse(s) you were inserted into.

There are important resources for insight into the working of qualifications through reflection on one's own family qualification frameworks (fqfs). How have qualifications related to personal identity and life chances across several generations? What assumptions about formal recognition of learning and status have been imprinted in family discussions? (This relates just as well to not having formal qualifications as to having them. To what extent were people qualified without holding qualifications? To what extent were they enabled or disabled by the nqf?)

Several common aspects are likely to emerge in many South African accounts across sectors. The first is the awareness that in earlier years the nqf is very difficult to pinpoint. There was certainly no conscious overarching policy regarding qualifications. A hundred years ago the nqf consisted of the offerings of scattered institutions, sometimes linked to metropolitan (UK) master institutions. There was some missionary and government education, the beginnings of more systematic state provision, and training in various trades and professions. For the most part, though, one's qualifications at that time would have been closely related to personal and family histories, and to the facilities of the small town or village in which one lived. A letter of recognition might have been as good as a certificate, while possession of a degree would have been viewed with awe-struck respect.

For all but the tiny upper crust of national society, one's 'qualification' depended on one's basic literacy (learned in the local 'dame school'); one's savvy and enterprise, learned by 'sitting by Nellie'; who one knew; the job one managed to land; and above all, one's colour and class[93]. A black South African, steeped in millennia of African knowledge and culture, would have lived then in a narrowing world where his or her qualification had less and less importance in a rapidly imposed modernity. Historical studies show us that a century ago many black South Africans were grasping modern educational opportunities, however limited, and using their enterprise to create livelihoods and wealth in this modernity, only to find these livelihoods repeatedly demolished by policies limiting access to land, resources, technical training and higher-level jobs.[94]

One hundred years ago, limited forms of technical and vocational education were available almost exclusively to people of colour. They were associated with poverty and with what now looks like a patronising concern with inculcating basic practical virtues and domesticating skills. (To some extent the image has never been shed.) With the creation of the Union of South Africa this situation was reversed, with technical and vocational provision offered only to (mainly poor) whites and increasingly linked to more highly specified curricula and qualifications.[95]

Fifty years ago in South Africa qualifications were more structured and more powerfully and deliberately used for policy, without being in any sense lucid or coherent. They were experienced as reflecting the nature of things, not as ideological instruments, with the only exceptions a tiny minority of officials who made decisions about qualifications. Very few of these officials had a self-conscious or critical view of the relationship of their work to power, interests and other factors. They also had very little, if any, concern about how the qualification they were specifically concerned with articulated with any other qualifications or systems of provision. But even intensely aware critics of educational injustice, like the formulators of the Freedom Charter, probably aspired to the given qualifications of the time without the sense that these could lock people into roles. Their critique was directed at restricted access to a set of qualifications that had very rapidly become conventional, and to some aspects at content, but not at the system of qualifications itself.

[93] In an arresting monograph on the shifting historic features of South African English pronunciation, Lanham (1982) showed the pressure of class encoding in the power centre of the early Witwatersrand. The descending order of class power and influence that he depicts in the early 1900s is roughly as follows: Pure British upper-middle (Oxbridge), Natal English (private school), British lower-middle technical (Cornish miners), Eastern Cape English, Black labourer, poor white Afrikaner. According to Lanham, to gain position and self-respect ordinary English speakers aspired increasingly to standard English, unlike their counterparts in Australia and Canada. (The pressure may still be felt in South Africa.) For a classic view on culture in colonialism, see Manoni (1950).

[94] Most striking is Van Onselen (1996).

[95] See Badroodien (2003) and other chapters in McGrath (2003). Gilmour (1984) conducted doctoral studies, rare in South Africa, exploring the role of qualifications in employability.

Determiners of qualifications 50 years ago would have included:

- the very powerful influence of the historically curious, dysfunctional and class-ridden British systems of provision and qualification
- the related dominance of the image and influence of a handful of universities to which many aspired but few could gain access (though access was about to grow dramatically). Schooling qualifications were decided by the universities' Matriculation Board.
- systems of selection and training developed by powerful industries, notably mining, with a strong behaviourist or psychometric influence from the USA[96]
- various craft guilds, which had begun to move from traditional apprenticeships to the combination of institutional learning and workplace experience, with access strictly limited to whites. Trade and occupational qualifications in nationalised industries (the railways, electricity supply and many others) ensured a basic supply of skills for a racially skewed economy while contributing to the upliftment of poor whites.
- the centrality of the use of qualifications by Afrikaner nationalism for ethnic and racial empowerment against the humiliations of British (capitalist) imperialism – in a way that mainly bought into the given structures of qualifications while adapting curricula to the language and content demands of Christian National Education
- the related creation of segregated qualifications for different race groups
- a persistent tension between racial ideology and the rising demands for qualified work during and after the Second World War: the openness and responsiveness demanded by startling growth was faced with inhibitions relating to obstinate policy. This tension was to be chronic through upswings and downswings, and was to drive much change in demand if not access to qualifications, and frustrate it at the same time.

For the most part these centres of influence moved on quite different tracks, with little thought of how they spoke to one another and little expectation of movement from one to the other. While education provision and curriculum were used in rather piecemeal acts of social engineering, there was little or no conscious 'grand narrative' of qualifications.

We will move in the next section to the build-up to changing this situation. But first we need to deal with another aspect of qualifications.

The power of knowledge in its own right

So far, we could be left with the impression that qualifications are merely a question of exercising power and of locally situated historical needs for certain forms of competence to maintain or renew hierarchies of social roles. This would be a one-sided view. Qualifications systems must be responsive to something in the nature of knowledge that might be seen as an autonomous imperative. And they must also nurture this imperative. In nature a dance with bright plumage is not just about power and dominance, or success with the opposite sex, but about the future, about the selection of the genes that prosper and about health. More relevant to the present argument, the dance has its codes that exist because of, yet apart from, the question of power or context. (The codes are sometimes explained as a kind of grammar, the rules of which guide the choreography without our being conscious of them. The codes are often tacit or ineffable (impossible or extremely difficult to specify in words) – but they exist and must be cared for independently of their social purposes as well as in relation to their social purposes.)

This kind of reasoning is far more important when it comes to deciding, for example, what kinds of knowledge, what curriculum and what pedagogy must be supported and encouraged by qualifications – if the country and the individual learners are to get, for example, the physics and the catering they deserve. Socially constructed knowledge and ideology will be present in all sorts of ways in the design of a qualification in physics, and perhaps even more in catering. But this does not mean that physics or catering lack distinctive knowledge structures that need very important acknowledgement in themselves, if – among other things – the ideological dynamic is to be satisfied. For example, we can now discern decisions about curriculum or provision taken after 1994 that were in some ways self-defeating. Because they were motivated primarily by urgent political imperatives, they were very thin in following professional imperatives in education and training. This was all the more the case because of the rejection of the expert-

96 The former National Institute for Personnel Research (NIPR), incorporated into the HSRC in the 1980s, and the Chamber of Mines worked together to create highly sophisticated forms of standardised psychometric testing, especially for the placement of mine workers. The institution of standardised testing seems to have gained an unfortunate reputation and is still largely out of favour in South Africa.

ise of the previous regime. The result was that the satisfaction of the political imperatives, for all its inevitability, was short-lived, while political dissatisfactions continued because of the imbalance. (Whether knowledge structures that professional experts are presumed to know are 'real', or are necessary fictions to sustain purpose and progression in learning, does not change this need.)

One of the achievements of the power of the NQF has been to trigger much fresh critical thinking about the structure and transmission of knowledge. The critique comes especially from those who think the NQF is informed by simplistic and mechanistic views of the extremely complex, bottomless questions about 'the nature of knowledge'.

There are very old debates about the nature of knowledge that the NQF accommodates while it is seen as standing on one side or the other. Is knowledge a product of revelation, contemplation, observation, action? Is it inescapably shaped by patterns and boundaries set by the human mind, or is it a matter of the objective reality 'out there'? Is it material or spiritual, immanent or transcendent? How is it created or transmitted? Is it essentially the result of communities of practice? Is the only knowledge worthy of recognition decontextualised knowledge gained in formal, institutional contexts of learning? What is the status of local and contextualised know-how? And how does it relate to formal knowledge – if at all? What is the relationship between the whole and the parts of knowledge? Is the whole a measurable, additive accumulation of the parts, or does the whole transcend the parts, or is it something quite different from the parts?

There is a sense in which the NQF professes to be agnostic about these interesting questions. It is important that they be asked and researched. All that matters for the NQF, however, is whether the physicist can do what physicists do according to the well-formed, codified judgements on adequate evidence of those with insight into physics and what it means to be a physicist. In a context of racial redress, this must especially include considerations of the stringent relevance of judgements. (The ability to tell the right jokes in the faculty dining room can no longer count.) But critics see the NQF as complicit with various limiting orientations, and that these are necessarily entailed by some of its key features. We will turn to these questions later.

Let us revisit the earlier question of what an individual's pqf or fqf might be. This may be helped by some reflections on how one views knowledge and competence, which forms of knowledge one has been given permission to pursue (by whom?), which agencies give identity to that knowledge, how they decide that doors should be opened or closed to a person, and how many doors into other possibilities may open once that knowledge is in place. In short, what assumptions about qualifications does the individual take for granted?

It should be clear by now that qualifications are not only concerned with individual fulfilment (or frustration), but are enmeshed in the dynamics of social and knowledge structures. They are reflections of these, but also instrumental in them. It may be helpful to see their relationship with the personal, social and epistemic as dialectical, but this view may also be too neat. At times they seem to be drawn into black holes of intensified, unpredictable power relations.

Qualifications before modernity

As we have seen, it is possible to go back almost to the very origins of life to find the nqfs that lie behind the NQF. If we focus on the idea of qualifications as certificates that acknowledge learning or experience in order to allocate position, power, access or entitlement, we might go back to the medieval universities (where the term 'matriculation' – or being put on a list – has its origins). Or we might, on the other hand, go to the guilds that certified capability and entitlement to practise a trade or a skill – what they sometimes called their mystery – and eventually to master it. In addition, there are the famous examination systems for entry to the civil service of imperial China and modern Great Britain. Within these different systems we find very different forms of knowledge being celebrated and promoted.

The medieval universities emphasised contemplative and speculative knowledge, theology and the transmission of the achievements of classical sciences and thought. Their disciplines were not merely taken up with abstractions, however. On the contrary, their pursuits were viewed as having the most serious consequences for the meaning and quality of life, as well as being concerned with health and government.

At the same time, the guilds and trades were by no means only concerned with brute practicality. They saw themselves as nurturing and passing on deep understandings, often in the form of 'tacit' knowledge that could only be understood by 'living with' the master.[97] As for the civil service examinations, they were not based on batteries of

[97] See Gamble's (2004) remarkable studies of craft knowledge for a profound view of the relationship between master and apprentice in the process of learning.

competencies drawn from an analysis of the tasks of civil servants, but on rigorous tests of higher-level literacy reflected in the ability to read, comment on and write in the form of the classics. They seem in their way to have been remarkably effective in preparing high-level administrators for their roles.

In all of these areas a useful distinction was sometimes made at times using two words for the concept of 'knowing' – a distinction that has been lost in English. In the Latin languages these two words are *cognoscere* and *conascere* (in French, *savoir* and *connaître*); in German *wissen* and *kennen*; in Afrikaans *weet* and *ken*). The first means 'to know' in the sense of *to know that* … or *to know how* …, in the way that one knows a fact or has mastered a process. The second means 'to know' in the way one knows a close friend, or a piece of music one has mastered, or the valley one grew up in. (Interestingly, *cognoscere* is related to cognition, while *conascere* literally meant 'to be born together with something'.) Although all three areas of learning required much 'cognition', they would all seem to have given priority in the last resort to the deeper knowledge of being steeped in a tradition or a way of thinking. This does not mean they were necessarily conservative, as the tradition could be seen as having a dynamic relationship with present needs. This view of knowledge as somehow transcending experience is very different from the view that all knowledge is generated in relation to experience and contexts.[98]

With the massive surge in the power of technology and the growth of factories in the modern era, the idea of learning as *conascere* lost much ground. People either no longer needed skills because they were reduced to repetitive mechanical work, or they needed a great deal of mechanical and technical know-how, or they needed the kind of knowledge that a ruling class needs when it owns the processes being carried out by the labourers and technicians. Only in the latter did *conascere* still matter, and then in a perverted kind of way.

Dialectical thinking, which we touched on above, brings the two sides of knowing into active relationship in acts of creativity, but much recent thinking blurs the picture considerably. Nonetheless, the idea that there are fundamentally different modes of knowledge runs through the history of the NQF, though not always at a conscious level.

These distinctions are important in discussions of the NQF. They can be used in ways that bring power to the NQF or diminish its power. These should be clearer in the closing section of this study.

6.2.2 The worlds of quality assurance and standards[99]

The practices of standards-based design and quality assurance figure largely in many NQFs. An NQF might be conceivable without reference to the quality assurance and standards movements, but in some ways NQFs belong in the same broader world of results-driven management thinking or of what has been called 'the new managerialism'[100]. This brought to the idea of the NQF, which uses strong forms of ideas, the power of global management and business at a point in history when these were seen to have fed the Asian Tigers and to be triumphing over the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and were being vindicated in the People's Republic of China.

Even leaders in left-leaning or alternative education tendencies were brought over – often reluctantly and with enduring reservations – to the quality assurance and standards approaches. They were (partially) persuaded by the promise of greater efficacy. Emancipatory pedagogies had provided intense motivation for activists without having an impact on any scale. There were particular problems with ensuring that the qualities they promoted at the centre were sustained at the periphery. Linked with the appeal of qualifications and competency-based credits, quality assurance and standards offered mechanisms for managing and accelerating sought-after transformation.

Quality assurance and standards came to the fore in business management theory and in international bureaucracy, especially in relation to manufacturing in the 1980s. They are inescapably marked by their links to Thatcherism and by their focus on inputs.

The argument for quality assurance and standards was obvious: we can best ensure quality outputs by ensuring

[98] The distinctions drawn in this paragraph are made by Josef Pieper (1992). His post-war *Leisure: the basis of culture* argued that schooling was set aside from the world of work and that the world of work existed for the world of knowledge, and not vice versa. The contemplative, truth-seeking life gave meaning to the world of work. He might have said that the roots of competence lie in deeper understanding or wisdom, and that practical skills must grow out of them.

[99] This section owes much to the long experience and reflection of Chris Vorwerk (personal communications), but also draws on a range of writings on this subject: Badat (2004), Freeman (1993), Barnett (1994), Berlach (2004), Gevers (2005), MacGilchrist (1997), Potterton (2005), Sallis (1994) and Shalem et al. (2004).

[100] See Footnote 19.

sound inputs and process conditions. The best way to do this is by very carefully specifying broad inputs and process conditions, including all important aspects of capacity such as human resources, knowledge, facilities, equipment, technology and systems (especially quality management systems or QMSs) to produce the desired goods and services. Quality assurance with specified standards was seen as a great improvement on older forms of checking and accountability, which fell under the heading of quality control. (Quality control meant simply measuring outputs *post facto*, based on inspection and sampling, and discarding what did not meet the specification or standard). The virtue of quality assurance was that it made fairly sure there were no failures in the product and services, whereas quality control after the event meant going back to fix the problems, which could be costly and inefficient. In its most persuasive original forms, quality assurance is projected as essentially participative and developmental.

The fact that quality assurance is concerned with inputs does not mean it had nothing to do with outputs or results. The quality assurance and standards movement in education and training, which was largely European and specifically British, linked up in spirit with the practices of Goal Oriented Project Planning (GOPP) based on the Logical Framework Analysis developed by Rand Corporation and the Pentagon in the USA and widely disseminated in the 1980s. Both approaches required systematic design based on 'planning back' from the desired outputs, based on a thorough participative problem analysis.[101]

It is here that the linkage to criterion and competency-based instructional design becomes clear. Again, these were associated largely with industrial training, but were also applied to aspects of education that clearly involved skills development. These movements involved specifying the expected outputs against which achievement would be rigorously assessed. After that the instruction could be rationalised for best and fastest effect in terms of the criteria or competencies specified. Although this could look brutally instrumentalist, much depended on the understanding of competence, which could take rich forms involving the necessary cognitive and cultural roots of capability. Standards were intended to be rich, accessible and reasonably comprehensive descriptions of what would be required in assessment, and were strictly speaking only guides to assessment, with only an indirect relationship to the instruction leading to the assessment. (Unit standards as used in the South African NQF set out a specific formula for what should be in a standard.) Measures intended to work against the fragmentation and reductionism of some competency-based practices included

- adopting the broader term 'outcomes' in preference to 'competencies' or 'criteria'
- taking the whole qualification and its purposes as a starting point
- specification of critical outcomes or core competencies or key skills. These included cognitive, social and cultural aspects of competence.
- requiring attention to underpinning knowledge assumed in the competence

In spite of provisions like this, the nexus of quality assurance and (competency) standards has been criticised for fragmenting learning into little boxes that can be ticked off even by those without insight into the disciplines or skills domains in question.

Quality assurance was drawn into the world of education in the first place by British universities for a number of reasons: they were under massive pressure to be more responsive to economic and productive interests and to be managed as clusters of 'business units'. This was at a time when the idea started to take hold that even the most visionary arts project had to have a 'business plan'.[102] In addition, the UK was starting to transform the polytechnics (roughly equivalent to South African technikons) into universities of technology, and questions of maintaining comparable standards or providing a basis for competitiveness seemed to demand quality assurance.

In the 1990s the quality assurance movement was introduced to the world of schooling. It seems to have taken hold very unevenly, with major resistance in some countries (notably Australia) for its perceived inappropriateness to the ethos and professionalism of education. Planning and judging capability and success are very different in educational endeavours and in factories or chain stores. Although quality assurance and the use of standards allowed a place for recognising the importance of professional judgement, the movement in general was experienced as undermining the development and value of professional judgement.

The idea of outcomes and standards as a basis for a South African NQF was adopted in the 1993 deliberations of the NTSI. The idea of quality assurance was anointed by the shift in the naming of ETQAs. These key components

[101] GOPP (or ZOPP in German) was used extensively in South Africa as a planning and monitoring tool for funded projects by GTZ in the 1990s.

[102] See David Lodge's satirical novel, *Nice Work* (1988), for a picture of academics in the humanities under Thatcherite pressure to work with and for industry in the 1980s.

of the NQF were originally to be called 'Education and Training Qualifications Authorities'. To clarify and subordinate their roles the name was changed, rather awkwardly, to 'Education and Training Quality Assurance bodies' (thankfully, the 'b' was never added to the abbreviation).

Another related movement was that of evaluation research and impact assessment, which emerged in the 1980s as a discipline for establishing the worth of social interventions. Their language and models speak to the same kind of discourse. Here programme logic models, objectives, outcomes, indicators, measurement methods and the other accoutrements of positivistic inquiry create the same kind of scenario where project managers work to achieve the standards set by evaluators – even if the beneficiaries are compromised.

Quality assurance and standards can appear to have added layers of detailed bureaucratic procedures to South African education and training. A provider might find itself, because of its different offerings, having to refer to any of about 32 key quality assurance bodies (if one includes the professional associations) in order to obtain accreditation and approval and to be able to have its qualifications recognised.[103] Quality assurance not only includes capacity to conduct valid assessment of outcomes (that was the 'lean' understanding of several of the original NQF enthusiasts) or a reputable QMS, but a whole raft of requirements from governance, financial management and sustainability to the possession of current health and safety certificates for the premises.

There are widely different views of the combination of quality assurance and standards. On the negative side they can be seen as fussy, intrusive and unworkable. On the positive side, they

- require what any reputable provider of credits and qualifications should have in place in any case
- are often experienced by providers as scaffolding for developmental quality partnerships with the appropriate authorities
- protect the public from fraudulent or unprofessional practices
- make the requirements and conditions for 'best practices' as transparent as possible

This last point is considered particularly valuable when transformation is being promoted in multicultural contexts. The requirement for participative development of an organisation's QMS brings into the open many assumptions about appropriate ways of managing and doing things, and their rationales, that otherwise remain unstated and often lead to inefficiency or conflict.[104]

The extent to which quality assurance and standards bring power to the NQF is difficult to estimate. They undoubtedly supply substantial structured, hierarchical mechanisms for the exercise of power. It is not certain whether they continue to bring the power of positive repute from the world of business. Quality assurance and standards, together with related demands for accountability that have been able to sink promising enterprises, can take on forms that belie the developmental intent and slip into the domain of bureaucracy. This is particularly the case when there are low levels of human resources bearing the kind of insight and capacity for judgement needed by ideal forms of quality assurance and standards. The downward spiral from transforming vision to compliance with multiple specifications is accelerated by such lack of capacity.

Quality assurance at its best is self-regulatory behaviour, where the intrinsic reward is doing the right things and getting them right (first time). When it is driven by a quality assurance bureaucracy and when quality assurance becomes extrinsic (that is compliance with specifications), the power shifts from those directly involved to those who manage. In the last resort, it is not the concepts of quality management, quality assurance and quality control that are negative but how these are implemented in practice. When power shifts from those involved to those who need to exercise central control, then quality assurance, that was intended to be participatory and local, is imposed as *fiat* and quality management becomes an end in itself without reference to the purpose of the underlying process. This can no longer really be considered quality assurance – it is simply conformity. The same could be said for standards. While they may be broad in focus, the minute they are interpreted as specifications, they become trivialised and the power shift occurs again.

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[103] Work in progress that I am involved in on the accreditation of private FET providers in South Africa uses a matrix of 32 potential quality assurance bodies in its questionnaire. Most of the providers in the study need refer to only two or three quality assurers, but larger providers may refer to many more. The maximum in this small survey is 13.

[104] I owe this insight to Jennifer Bisgard of Khulisa Management Services. Khulisa provide training and support in setting up quality management systems (inter alia).

6.2.3 The world of examinations boards[105]

The NQF draws on the power of the institution and history of examinations boards, and of the critique of aspects of examinations boards. Their greatest commonality is their emphasis on the potential for assessment (and the related or implicit curriculum) to improve provision. Modern examinations boards have explored many of the innovations used by the NQF, and the discussion here refers essentially to a traditional model.

Arguably the most problematic feature of the examinations boards is the rarity of the summative assessment moments (perhaps once or twice in a lifetime) through which they exert sweeping influence over extended provision of education. By contrast, the NQF allows for many levels of certification. The NQF offers a broader framework for certification than that provided by the examinations board model (linking different levels or bands and allowing the recognition of learning not based in institutions of learning as well as a wider range of forms of assessment). The qualifications of examinations boards can, if appropriate, be incorporated into NQF qualifications. In fact, however, the examinations board model continues to be used for far more full qualifications than the NQF (mainly the Senior Certificate or matric provided by one national, nine provincial and two independent assessment bodies – in effect, examinations boards). The power relationship is therefore uneasy.

The peculiarly British institution of multiple public examinations boards (or awarding bodies) originated in an effort to raise standards during the mid-Victorian growth of state-provided education.[106] While they did not necessarily lay down the whole school curriculum, their activities characteristically included

- design and publication of examination syllabuses
- appointment of examiners and moderators
- setting of public examinations, most commonly using essay-type questions
- overseeing the running and marking of the examinations
- moderating and publishing the results
- organising professional events to disseminate learning from the experience of the examinations
- researching, developing and disseminating improved assessment and related curriculum practices

An important feature of most examinations boards is that they stand outside and are autonomous of the providing authorities. (This does not mean that they cannot have very fruitful cooperative relationships.) In South Africa, public examinations boards – now called 'assessment bodies' – have been seen as problematic because they are functions of provincial and national authorities.

Examination boards have been closely linked with the institution of school inspection for aspects of what we now call quality assurance. The model was disseminated throughout the British Empire and still has a major influence over many fields of learning throughout the Commonwealth. For example, the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (now Cambridge Assessment) was established in 1858 and is still involved in examining or guiding public examinations in many countries in Africa and elsewhere as well as in the UK itself. For technical and vocational assessment, City & Guilds was established in 1878 (and was already examining candidates in Australia in 1887).

The examinations board model is experienced by many people in the English-speaking world as normative and may be taken for granted to the extent that other modes of public assessment seem counterintuitive. Different approaches may be experienced as distinctly alien: for example, the highly centralised French *Baccalaureat*, the completely decentralised German *Abitur* and the American mix of localised high school examinations and national standardised testing systems for access to higher education. Examinations boards and their practices seem equally strange in the eyes of many who are foreign to the model.

Examinations boards draw power from their normative standing in the public view as well as from their statutory status, their professional repute, their frequently close relationship with universities and – perhaps most notably – from the fact that they are the gatekeepers firstly of higher education, and secondly of life and work beyond school. At their best, examinations boards can sustain valued communities of practice through the levels of professional par-

[105] This section draws intensively on my experience as the Director of Adult Examinations and later of Research and Communication in the IEB. These roles involved me in writing about all aspects of the IEB's work.

[106] Information here is taken from the websites of Cambridge Assessment and the three associated Boards.

ticipation by examiners and markers and by the richness of their feedback into the classroom. However, these qualities may be weaknesses when examinations board operations become massive and control of professional capacity through the process becomes unsure.

In apartheid South Africa quality assurance and public assessment followed the inspection and examination board model. The Joint Matriculation Board (JMB) within the Committee of University Principals (CUP) set out the requirements for university entrance and set its own examinations. These were the only nonracial examinations and were regarded as something of a benchmark, in some respects making higher cognitive demands than the school-leaving examinations run by the provincial education departments (for whites) and the various ethnically distinct national examinations. In addition there was an ostensibly equivalent school-leaving examination for vocational education. Rules of subject combination and grades of examination (e.g. higher, standard, practical) determined the levels of access provided by the resulting certificate.

Perceptions of huge variability in the standards of the different matric qualifications and the need to rationalise provision and the qualifications system were given as reasons by reformists for starting to abolish the JMB in 1986. There was also concern that the providers were both players and referees, and that the temptation to misrepresent achievement was too high to allow for the approach to be entirely credible. In the place of the JMB a centralised certification council was set up to moderate the different public examinations for schooling and ensure comparable standards.

The IEB was established in 1998 because private schools, with an increasingly multiracial intake, were alarmed at having to segregate their learners according to ethnic examinations and their syllabuses as a result of the abolition of the JMB. In addition, there was scepticism about the ability to ensure a common standard, and a fear that there would be a 'dumbing down' from the cognitive demands of the JMB.[107]

The IEB was created in discussion with the leadership of the NECC and proponents of People's Education. Drawing on a wave of international interest in reforming assessment to improve the quality of education and training, and linking this to the excitement about the future of lifelong learning in South Africa, the IEB ran a series of influential national workshops on matters of curriculum and assessment in the early 1990s. One of the repeated concerns was the influence of higher education on the curriculum of the whole of schooling that cascaded down from matric. The argument was that the vast majority of young people in South Africa were not destined for higher education, and that other qualities and knowledge might be more important than those dictated by the needs of academic careers.

Drawing on the workshops and its own programme of innovation intended to build on and also transform the tradition of the JMB, the IEB put into practice an extended programme of development. This included experimental public examinations at Standard 7 (Grade 9) that focused on higher-order cognitive skills rather than prescribed content. The examinations involved intensive involvement by user groups of practitioners to design the curriculum, and develop and critique the assessments.

The IEB's development of a system of examinations for adult education made use of outcomes, but only as the starting point for the development of a culture of standards through development and dissemination of exemplars and the running of large collective assessment events through which the standards were both established and mediated. This worked well in the relatively content-independent areas of numeracy and literacy. The success reflected a spiral of growth in that there was a highly professional community of existing curriculum development and generally progressive practice seeking a common sense of levels of achievement.[108]

The adult examinations also introduced the assumptions of credit accumulation rather than the time-bound requirements used by many examinations boards (that is, demanding that all subjects offered by a candidate be achieved within a limited period).

Growing from its experience in these areas of innovation, the IEB also pioneered dedicated training in assessment.

107 I owe insights here to discussions with the late Michael Corke and with David Adler, both key founders of the IEB.

108 National NGOs involved in this process, with many decades of cumulative experience in curriculum and materials development, included the English Literacy Project, Operation Upgrade, Project Literacy, Teaching English Language and Literacy (TELL), Using Spoken and Written English (USWE) and the collective National Literacy Cooperation (NLC). A range of private (for-profit, industrial) providers were involved as well.

The work of the IEB was influential, particularly in the salience it gave to assessment-led change. Its work was a marked point of reference in the founding Board and management of SAQA [109], and the first standards registered on the NQF were based directly on the adult basic education and training outcomes and assessment guides of the IEB.[110]

Within the state system, the pressure of established practices and the public standard of the matric examination made the maintenance of credible systems and practices a priority for the new single education system with its nine provincial executive departments. The transitional period proved traumatic (with high media coverage of scandals about leakages and the standards of papers). This forced a concentration on maintaining, improving and refining existing public examination practices. However, changes were introduced in line with the ethos of the NQF and the introduction of OBE that have slowly taken effect. There has been a new emphasis on continuous assessment and the improvement of educator competence in assessment, plus efforts to focus on higher-order cognitive skills. There is also an intent to increase the points of high-stakes assessment through provision, but this has only been realised through offering a GETC for adult learners at the end of ABET Level 4 (equivalent to Grade 9). There have been major efforts to improve site-based assessment at Grade 9, and indeed through all years of schooling.
The relationship of the NQF to the results produced by South Africa's 12 assessment bodies for general and further education and training is ambivalent. The Senior Certificate (now National Senior Certificate – differentiated into academic and vocational) is registered on the NQF, but in many ways operates without reference to the NQF. The power of examinations boards, which might have been subsumed into the NQF and expanded, has been both positive and negative. Moreover, the idea that the assessment system should be separate from the providers has proven to be one of the most complex, divisive and power-sapping aspects of the NQF.

6.2.4 The world of NQFs[111]

The ideas, structures and functions of NQFs are dealt with extensively throughout this study. In this section the focus is on the international NQF 'movement' and the flow of power within it and intrinsic to it.

The subject is made almost impossibly complex by the sheer diversity of actual NQFs in national or regional contexts. Perhaps the only commonality across NQFs is the very general commitment to some systematic clarification of the roles and relationships of qualifications in the particular society. Beyond that there are major, potentially conflicting and always mixed sets of motives, purposes and structure. For example, the idea of generic skills was favoured both by politicians or economists concerned with a more flexible labour market, and by education and training professionals who wanted to go beyond the narrow utilitarianism of some current approaches to competence. NQFs differ widely in scope, comprehensiveness, prescriptiveness, mechanisms and mode (as in frameworks of communication versus highly specified frameworks). Even within these categories the terms look different in different places. For example, an NQF may look highly prescriptive in its self-description and specifications, but the prescription has mainly illustrative force for purposes of communication (as in the case of the Australian NQF).

Perhaps most important, NQFs differ in their contexts. Thus, an idea that has powerful and positive effects in a context of wealth with highly-developed levels of education and training provision can look very different and may drain power in a poor and ill-equipped context. (Think for example of the use of peer review in a context of poor professional development, which can only reinforce low quality.) Surface structures and administrative mechanisms may seem the same in some ways, but the reality and effects must differ radically. The NQFs of Scotland, Fiji, Malaysia, South Africa, Estonia, Namibia, the European Union and Mauritius, with their vast economic, demographic, social and educational differences, can scarcely be comparable.

The picture of diversity can be modified in that many of the new NQFs being created would seem entirely to lack the South African NQF's transformational or reforming intent. Many of the more developed societies have reasonably effective establishments for education and skills development and seem most concerned about national, regional and global harmonisation of their qualifications, focusing on intelligibility and comparability.

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[109] David Adler, the National Director of the IEB, was Chairperson of the SAQA Board for its first three years; Samuel Isaacs, the Executive Officer, had been on the IEB's Board, but withdrew once he was appointed to head SAQA.

[110] The 1995 Interim Guidelines setting the DoE's first policy on standards in ABET were written at the IEB, while the first standards registered by the DoE on the NQF were those for ABET language communication and numeracy. These were taken virtually unchanged from the user guides resulting from the IEB's development work. The IEB's 'standards' were made mandatory by many donors as a basis for quality assurance, notably by the Joint Education Trust, which funded much of the development.

[111] This section is informed by Young (2003b and others), European Commission (2001/2005), Philips (2003), Blackmur (2003 and 2004a), Gunthorpe (2004), NVQ website (2004), Tuck (2007), Raffe (2005), SAQA (2003), Chisholm (2006) and the very useful coverage in Keevy (2005), Blom (2007), Allais (2007) and Mukora (2007).

A useful distinction can be made between the extrinsic and intrinsic play of power within the idea of an NQF. Extrinsic factors are those that are not specific to the mission of promoting learning and its recognition – essentially the political and economic pressures that are thought to underpin the idea of an NQF, such as globalisation, neo-liberal reduction of the role of the state in social provision and the rise of 'managerialism' and related notions about flexible skilling for employment and competitiveness. Intrinsic factors are those concerned with aspects internal to the professional missions of education and training, including theories of knowledge, curriculum, pedagogics and the management of provision in the interests of greater quality. Inevitably the two are interwoven as are all social, economic and cultural relationships between notional substructures and superstructures.

In this section the focus is on the power of the intrinsic factors, the culture that has grown up around the idea and the institutions of NQFs in the past 20 years.

Precursors to NQFs emerged in response to uniquely British problems in education and training in the late 1970s and 1980s. British models of provision, curriculum, assessment and general theory in education and training are pervasive throughout the former Empire – now the Commonwealth – and tend to be adopted and adapted in preference to other alternatives. The idea of an NQF moves through the Commonwealth, starting in some wealthier member states. It comes to South Africa especially through various close ties with Australia and New Zealand, and only later refers back to the different related developments in England, Scotland and Ireland. The expansion of interest in the idea of an NQF into non-Commonwealth states could be attributed to regional associations and their fields of influence (the European Union, SADC and the African Union more broadly), where some pressure for national NQFs is exerted by the need to link into a looser regional framework. (There are, however, examples that do not belong within this pattern, notably that of Mexico.)

The picture of a smooth flow of influence is somewhat blurred by the increasing generality of policy concerns in a globalising world. This is brought home by the fact that the first mention of competence-based standards and qualifications in British policy for youth training (in 1981) is found at the same time as the publication of the De Lange Report in South Africa. De Lange was concerned with many of the same issues and mooted the rationalisation of qualifications. As in Britain and its other areas of influence, the relationships between qualifications (comparability, linkages) were equally bewildering in South Africa.

By the mid-1980s authorities for streamlined vocational qualifications were being set up in England and Scotland. In 1989-90 the New Zealand NQF was legislated into being, and was the first institution to be called an NQF. The Malaysian National Skills Qualification Framework, strictly concerned with occupational qualifications, was set up in 1993. In 1995 Australia and South Africa legislated NQFs of very different kinds and Mexico started developing its National Occupational Qualifications System. (By contrast, the USA seems to have shown a negative interest in qualifications frameworks.) Ireland followed in 1999. Singapore established its National Skills Recognition System in 2000. Since 2000 major powers like China and Brazil have taken on the idea of an NQF, and SADC countries have reached various stages in the development of their own NQFs with a view to a broader regional qualifications framework. In 2007 the EU voted to establish a European Qualifications Framework after many years of debate, and collaboration among groups of members. By now over 50 countries either have NQFs or are working towards their establishment, with a substantial number in Eastern Europe.

These developments are clearly related to concerns about the adequacy, flexibility and mobility of skills, but much of the thinking reaches deep into characteristically educational concerns.

The term 'policy borrowing' has been applied to the dissemination of the idea of an NQF.[112] Regular swings of fashion, usually disseminated through the metropolitan centre (for example London, Washington, Paris), seem to be *de rigueur* in education. Characteristically the swings are from more to less authoritarian modes of curriculum and delivery and back again. In the 1960s influential parts of the world discovered (again) the need to undermine rigidly organised classrooms and the dead transmission of inert knowledge. The movement was captured in the titles of various influential books: *Teaching as a subversive activity*, *De-schooling society*, *The disappearing dais*, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, *The diploma disease*. Picking up on the early 20th century enthusiasm for progressive ideas, the movement celebrated spontaneous learning, play, popular culture, everyday knowledge and the local vernacular spoken by young people. It tended to favour 'whole language' and constructivist approaches (rather than drills).

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[112] An Internet search shows that the politics of international policy borrowing in education is an emerging field of concern and study. See also Halpin & Troyna (1995).

How deeply such fashions penetrate into the bedrock of schooling is difficult to tell. If they are translated into official practices it may be that only their surface features are complied with on any scale. They probably only affect vocational education and training through their influence on initial provision.

The idea of an NQF comes into being with a mixed heritage from the radical or progressive educational pressures of the 1960s. On the left is the discovery that progressive approaches consolidate rather than break down class distinctions and privileges. (As we have seen, this critique goes back to Gramsci in the 1920s, but is reflected in empirical findings in the 1970s.) There is also the discovery in the 1980s that formal structures and systems of public examination and certification need to be used for progressive ends, rather than abolished.[113] On the right, however, is a backlash against 'soft' approaches, a demand to 'go back to the basics' and to re-assert the value of formal structures, discipline and accountability for results. Between the two broad positions are many mixed motives and nuanced postures of accommodation and resistance that help form the idea of an NQF. The borrowing of the NQF in the Commonwealth and beyond is facilitated by previous imperfectly shared discourses of reform and reaction in educational fashions.

The first explicit notions of something like an NQF are inextricably linked to the struggle to break down class-linked rigidities and lack of mobility in British education, especially the invidious effects of the few points of public examination and selection (most notoriously, the erstwhile 11+ examinations). Youth unemployment and changing forms of work were high in the national consciousness when the first NQF-like notions surfaced in policy recommendations in 1981. There was a perceived need to improve the status, quality and relevance of vocational and technical education, especially in view of a failing apprenticeship system. This must be understood in terms of a knowledge culture that for centuries demoted vocational and technical education to the realm of the servile, while extravagantly admiring their effects. Even here the situation is complex, as the cultures of valuing and provision are remarkably different in England and Scotland. Thus, the original Scotvec (1985) is not so much adopted from the English system of NVQs as it is a political and cultural response to that system. The Scottish system is therefore quite different in approach and 'feel' from the English system. It has focused more on modularity than on standards, and has been more gradual, more closely based in the work and interaction of established institutions and more humanistic in its focus on individual and personal perspectives rather than systems or industrial needs.

Having put a strong emphasis on the British and Commonwealth origins of the NQF, it is important to remember that the South African NQF has not had much direct influence from the English NVQs and their later manifestations, and what influence there is has been somewhat negative.[114] As we have seen elsewhere in this study, the Australian and New Zealand influences came most strongly through personal and sectional contacts rather than official support, while the Scottish influence has communicated its spirit and practices rather than governing structures. Very strong support has come from Germany in particular, a country that sees the NQF as a vehicle for establishing something of the standing of skill in Germany without necessarily adopting German structures. (Germany is now constructing an NQF; it is interesting to speculate on the influence of the South African contribution to this.) Canada is a Commonwealth country without an NQF that has provided notable strategic support for the South African NQF.

Perhaps the most supportive aspect of the international NQF movement is the collegial community of insiders and engaged practitioners. There is a small international network of experts who know the theory very well and have participated in the short but intensive history of implementation of NQFs, however varied this has been. Inasmuch as it is possible in a world so full of higher-order systems abstractions, they speak the same language. Then there is in each country the outer circle of practitioners who have, perforce or with enthusiasm, developed pride in and ownership of the concepts and practices of the NQF in their field. This community constitutes an important binding force for the NQF and gives, at the very least, the power of institutional inertia to its continuity.

When all is said and done, it is important to remember that most of the NQFs we have considered are important yet modest administrative structures with nothing like the mission load of the South African NQF.

6.2.5 The worlds of SAQA, SETAs, Band ETQAs and related agencies

The key administrators of the NQF are SAQA, SETA and the band ETQAs and professional bodies. Collectively they

113 Oxenham (1984). Oxenham worked with Dore, who established the term 'diploma disease' in the 1970s.

114 In the early 1990s Prof. Michael Young was invited by NUMSA to help with the conceptualisation of the NQF. He drew on his experience of the NVQs and efforts to give status to vocational education in the UK. He later became a major critic of the South African NQF and of the ways in which NQFs in general were being used. From the start of his involvement he warned strongly against over-specification and the undermining of professional judgement by tick-box approaches. See Young's works in the Bibliography.

may be seen as generators of unprecedented power for adult education and training in South Africa, or as black holes into which energy collapses. Let us look at how they work:

An FET provider may offer qualifications or credits for ABET levels and at levels above Level 4. This means the provider might currently refer to the broad requirements of Umalusi in the General and Further Education and Training Band, and to the HEQC for the Higher Education Band.

Before a private provider can even start looking for recognition of its offerings, it is legally required to be registered by the national DoE. On the other hand, public FET providers report to the different departments of education, are 'deemed accredited' (like the departments and their schools) and therefore in effect escape the quality assurance and standards nets. Strictly speaking these requirements fall outside the NQF.

For specific offerings within the General, Further and Higher Education Bands the provider may have to subject itself to the requirements of any of 32 quality assurance bodies. These include the SETA ETQAs and the professional bodies, and may also include SAQA as a referee.

If the provider wants a particular offering to be credited on SAQA's National Learners' Records Database (NLRD) or to contribute to an officially recognised qualification, it must apply to the appropriate sector ETQA for accreditation or programme approval.

For part-qualifications, providers would send their programme to Umalusi, who would send it to the relevant SETA for programme approval, making two steps out of what is already a lengthy process. If the provider offers a full qualification, it must be accredited by the relevant SETA.

To be accredited the provider must submit substantial documentation and be open to inspection for verification. The verifiable documentation covers a considerable amount of ground, from the governance and financial probity of the provider, its staffing and commitment to equity, the suitability, health and safety of its premises, its materials and resources, student support systems, quality management systems and so on. Curriculum and courses may also have to be approved. In addition the provider must not only have officially registered assessors in the learning field on its staff, but must link into an acceptable system of external moderation and verification (and be able to pay for these). This is only the start to a paper (or electronic) chase that must be followed through the registration and submission processes after each qualifying assessment.

Although it was intended that a provider should only have to relate to one ETQA, which would then support qualifications or credits outside its field through a system of MoUs between ETQAs, this has not worked smoothly. In reality, as we have seen, private providers of any substance have to go through a maze involving three or four quality-assuring bureaucracies, and can find themselves relating to as many as 13.

Only registered qualifications qualify for recognition. Credits for individual unit standards may be awarded, but they take their meaning from the qualification within which they have been recognised.

It must be pointed out that officials in all of the quality-assurance agencies are either unclear about how the whole system fits together or have views on its details that contradict the views of other officials.

Proponents of the general approach offer a range of reasons for the way it is. Compared to the past, when there were no relationships between fields and no systematic coherence between forms of learning, this is a considerable advance – and in effect a considerable simplification and rationalisation. The apparent complexity of requirements actually lays down what any modern provider must, as a matter of course, have in place. The attention to inputs and process requirements gives providers considerable control over individual, contextualised approaches to the qualifications. A culture of best practices can grow through the communication of these requirements and through the accommodations and improvements in the system as it is progressively implemented. Present policy adjustments are intended to rationalise and simplify further.

From the opposite point of view, the arrangement is profoundly dysfunctional and disempowering. It represents a 'will to power' that has attempted, pre-emptively, to impose multiple novel and untested abstract systems upon extremely complex and differentiated fields of endeavour. These have several broad effects. Initially at least, and for a considerable period, they lead to multiple Catch-22 situations in which the conditions for compliance are not in place or require constant adjustment. (You can only register a learnership when the qualification to which it is intended to lead is registered, but the qualification cannot be registered because the demand for it has not been demonstrated by the existence of an appropriate learnership. You cannot be accredited because the qualifications you offer

have not yet been registered, but there are complex system inhibitions to the registration of the qualification. You are a new organisation and therefore cannot be accredited because you do not have *x* years of audited financial statements, etc.)

Secondly, the novel abstract systems sometimes disregard the countering power of accepted ways of doing things – at least some of which are rooted in rational responses to legitimate experience and are embedded in practice. (Traditional modes of prescribing inputs and checking outputs are perhaps the most important cases in point.) Thirdly, the novel systems create multiple new agencies, each of which rapidly develops its own culture of interpreting the systems constructs into unique modes of implementation in their contexts. The result is a variant on the Tower of Babel, in that whole organisations apparently speak the same language, but the words they use reflect mixtures of old and new meanings and produce results that are not comparable. Further, the whole setup links to South Africa's inherited problems and crisis of scarce skills, where there is an inescapable need to employ people who either still have to develop the needed insight, or do not have the grounding needed to do this. Since the general approach demands judgement on the basis of insight into the intentions and values of provisions, the result is a box-ticking emphasis on compliance, with the potential for intense alienation on the part of professional educators.

Let us consider just one of the features that lie at the heart of the NQF's values as they look from the point of view of the different administrators of the NQF: the fundamentals.

Fundamentals (usually competence in a language of wider communication and in number or mathematics) are not essential to the NQFs of developed economies in the way that they are to the South African NQF. This is because South Africa must approach FET and even HET with an assumption that the basics are not necessarily well established – an enduring legacy of apartheid education. The fundamentals are given prominence for various reasons. In the first place they are seen as integral to competence in terms of any specific qualification. Secondly, they are foundational to progression beyond the present qualification level, as well as being important for portability.

In reality these obvious intentions create serious problems. The fundamental unit standards properly define what would be looked for in an assessment. They are not syllabuses or the table of contents for courses. Ideally, a learner could be credited with the unit standard because of prior knowledge, or because of competence gained and assessed in ways that are totally integrated in the course of work or other specialised learning programmes. This ideal becomes quixotic in reality. The unit standards are nearly universally treated as course outlines, a practice that may lead to serious omissions in skills development and content.[115] As a result they become courses quite distinct from the learning and work around them. Not necessarily a bad thing in formal schooling, this is seriously problematic in workplace-linked learning. It can be experienced as imposed, irrelevant, a requirement to be complied with reluctantly, or to be so 'integrated' that it is trivialised and loses its specificity. When in addition the generic, decontextualised, content-free character of unit standards takes effect, different providers end up recognising achievements without anything resembling a common standard at the specified levels.[116]

This is partly a function of treating unit standards as sufficient guarantors of comparability (that they cannot be), but it is also very much a function of the different views of fundamentals across sectors and bands. In general education the fundamentals are normally given major standing in their own right. Although integrated 'language across the curriculum' remains a background ideal, it has been found to be very difficult to sustain. The same would apply in further academic and vocational education. However, when the training is linked to specific sectors or even workplaces, it is tempting for a provider to argue, for example, that the candidates' ability to read recipe books relevant to a Level 4 catering qualification is sufficient; when challenged to deliver a higher competence in language, the provider may turn away (with the argument that neither they nor the learner nor the employer see the point). Or they may resort to minimal compliance by offering programmes completely alienated from the life and work of the learners. Or, most likely, they will only employ or admit candidates to the training programme with a school-leaving certificate (formally allocated to Level 4), that will in very many cases reflect a competence way below that required by the Level 4 fundamental unit standard.

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[115] This was common in our IEB experience, where teachers would work their way through the outcomes statements in spite of repeated assurances that these were only relevant to the assessment. In subsequent work on ABET illustrative learning programmes for the erstwhile Gauteng Institute for Curriculum Development, our feedback clearly indicated a desire that content be linked step by step to the specific outcomes of the registered unit standards. The phenomenon will be confirmed by almost anyone working with unit standards.

[116] Umalusi's (2007) *The f-word report* on the standard of fundamentals offered by a multitude of FET providers is persuasive on this subject. Vorwerk argues that the difficulty of ensuring comparability in the fundamentals is not a problem in the same way in technical and vocational skills development (personal communication).

Inevitably, the way that fundamentals are viewed by different sub-sectors will be very different: language and number skills will have a high priority as a matter of course for prospective bank tellers at Level 5, while metalworkers at the same level will require lower or different competencies.

When we come to higher education, the fundamentals simply cannot be and are not built into discipline- or profession-oriented qualifications, which are virtually never unit-standard based. The importance of fundamentals (even more their lack) will be recognised and they will be incorporated as required, depending on the discipline or profession. Alternatively they will be offered as compensation or student support.

Similar discussions could be had on other key features of the NQF: for example, the critical cross-field outcomes and the need for qualified assessors will be viewed in radically different ways in different sectors and different bands.

For these reasons, inextricably linked to the dynamics of turf in the 32 bodies concerned, what should have been a centripetal constellation of celestial bodies pulling strongly together in support of the NQF has proved mostly centrifugal in a universe of action that rapidly expands away from the centre, leaving most of its components further and further apart.

The SETA ETQAs and the band ETQAs were meant to be accredited by SAQA and have their powers and responsibilities delegated to them by SAQA. Instead, the band ETQAs – HEQC for higher education and Umalusi for general and further education and training – have very much gone their own way in relationships with SAQA marked by reluctant, minimal and sometimes barely polite compliance with ambiguous legislation. The SETA ETQAs are in a clearer subordination to SAQA, yet even they have been swayed strongly by their own very varied capacity and even more by the very different contexts of the economic sectors they represent.

This might not necessarily be seen as negative in a much more long-term view. The diversity of responses to the highly specific demands of the NQF has triggered unique and valuable developments in many of the administering agencies and their sectors or constituencies. The NSDS is full of brilliantly-conceived strategies to stimulate and enable investments in education and training within the private sector. How these have actually benefited learners and workers or impacted on providers seems to be very variable, and will only be seen through case studies of achievement that remain to be presented to the public. Whether other approaches to promoting vibrant lifelong learning in South Africa might have been more cost-effective or profitable is impossible to say.

6.3 The world of theories of education and development [117]

The South African NQF may have gained strategic advantage in the short term by being under-theorised, but may lose power in the long term because of this. To say that the NQF is under-theorised may sound strange, given its massive generation of new and highly abstract terminology, but the claim should become clearer in the course of our consideration of the world of theory. It should also not be thought that the design of the NQF has lacked information from an intense quest to understand how other countries and systems function. Up to 1995 much was invested in visits to foreign countries to find out how they handled things. (Just one example: a large delegation led by Cosatu and funded by The United States Agency for International Development visited the USA to find out about the understanding and recognition of experiential learning and the assessment of critical outcomes or key competencies.) After 1995 the emphasis fell on visiting specialists, including experts from Scotland, Germany, Australia, New Zealand, England, Ireland, Canada, the USA and Holland. Some became almost permanently engaged in advising on the implementation of the NQF. However, the expertise has focused very strongly on 'how to' questions of systems design.

The relationship of theory to practice is uncomfortable. Whether the NQF would have been better or worse had it been supported by sustained academic theory is not clear. In theory, theory should improve the fit of what we do with 'reality', and might help towards greater quality, fineness or truth to the nature of things. The world of theory itself raises many problems with this assertion, however. How theory contributes to the power of the NQF is also difficult to discern. NQF theory, such as it is, has obviously been persuasive enough to mobilise sufficient political consent to allow for the legislation of an institution that has impacted on so many. However, the academic credentials of NQF theory have never been strong.

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[117] This section and the following on progressive thinking owes much to a response to Parker (see articles in the References and Bibliography), and to the range of theorists reflected in the References and Bibliography.

As happens in many human undertakings, though, the application of academic theory to the NQF comes largely after the event, trying to make explicit the half-silent theories that have driven the mission and to put forward what might be better theories about what has actually been happening. A small but highly vocal school of academic theorising has been driven by fundamental objections to key features of the NQF. It is doubtful that this will undermine the power of the NQF, any more than any of the sectoral resistance that has been touched on elsewhere. It may indeed be corrective by challenging the NQF to improve and to articulate fuller and more adequate theoretical positions.

There are schools of thought that maintain there is nothing but theory. Common sense finds it hard to understand this position. However, it is not difficult to argue that the NQF is fundamentally a tissue of theories. But these theories are presented as systems, structures, functions and practices in the mode of common sense, where grounding assumptions are seen as obvious. For example, even the idea that the NQF draws power from its commonalities with the Enlightenment – argued earlier in this study – was articulated well after the event. It has for the most part been an underlying, scarcely conscious motivator for some supporters of the NQF – a kind of hidden shaper of the discourse and certainly not an explicit position.

This section is concerned specifically with the worlds of theoretical disciplines. These deal in conceptual analysis and experimental testing, with the fresh application of minds informed by various traditions of argument and inquiry.

In terms of this view, NQFs in general are very poorly equipped with theory and equally poorly served by the worlds of theory. One might discern four ways in which this is the case:

- The key assumptions or implications of NQFs in general are virtually never clearly articulated or unpacked in terms of any significant schools of inquiry. Many implicit theories lurk in NQFs without ever being brought to light in terms of critical traditions or practices of thought in the areas in which the assumptions are made. NQFs depend implicitly on major unarticulated assumptions in areas like epistemology, pedagogy, didactics, theories of social and cultural change and change management, and linked areas of economics and politics. These are generally not brought to the surface or made explicit. Inasmuch as the assumptions are articulated, they are treated as unproblematic; the question that they might be open to contestation is not raised. The high level of abstraction in NQF discourse comes not from higher-order concepts but from a managerial or systems discourse that might be compared with explanations of, say, the rules of chess rather than constituting tools of inquiry. (Business systems thinking can become seriously etiolated when stretched across the broad and very different terrain of education and training.)

- The South African NQF has been extremely weak in the area of experimental research and development. Although it generates considerable amounts of data, guides and practical explanations, these bear little relationship to focused inquiry. None of the huge effects claimed for NQFs have been pre-tested or trialled, though they have been subject to fierce public investigation and debate. (SAQA is intent on becoming much more research-driven. It has conducted what is in effect a sustained market inquiry into perceptions of the NQF and practices that have emerged around the NQF. However no structure, idea or intention of the NQF has even been allowed to be put to the test of scenario planning, in that there is a toughly-imagined examination of the use of its functionalities by actual people in actual situations.)

- The relatively limited application of academic theorising to the NQF has arisen largely from a rejection of the way in which the NQF has gone about things, if not to what the NQF stands for. This theorising is far removed from the concrete contexts of its intentions or implementation. It tends to employ such a high order of specialised and speculative discourse, largely in the sociology of education, that its impact on the NQF and those who try to make it work is questionable.

- On the whole the NQF and the higher-order academic theorists (at least in South Africa) operate with little interest in theory/practice relations. The result is that the world of serious theory is either a matter of indifference to the NQF, or constitutes a drain on its power and status. The gulf between theory and practice mirrors and widens the gulf between education and training, while the NQF seeks, without the help of theory, to narrow this gulf. The NQF has never elaborated the theory of integration as its critics have elaborated the theoretical position against integration.

The lack of serious theoretical reflection has never been uncommon in the world of action. Limited reflection may be a short-term condition for the power and immediate success of action. In addition, critical theory has been sidelined in the era of the triumphant market and of rampant consumer choice. Perhaps for these reasons, NQFs seem to have avoided theory with some concentration. Or it may be in the nature of organisations that identify themselves as essentially administrative or instruments of management to be theoretically uninteresting.

In addition, the very idea of a framework may be seen in some ways to be theory-neutral. A framework supposedly allows for great flexibility and pluralism, allowing as many theories to be at play as can be useful. This argument may well be open to interrogation. We will look shortly at some questions raised by 'framework' thinking.

More importantly, though, the South African NQF positions itself not merely as an administrative agency, but as a social movement for transformation. In the interests of such deep and long-term intentions, it may have been better served by theory than it was. Against this proposition, it has been suggested that the power of the South African NQF was based on such fragile alliances and consensus that it could have been disastrous to pose too many deep questions about theoretical foundations or to attempt critical trials of feasibility.

The global contempt for theory was exaggerated in South Africa after 1990. Theorists rolled up their sleeves, as it were, and applied their intelligence to practical implementation. Serious theory had done its work in undermining the old regime. Even Marxists abandoned dialectical materialism and gave themselves over to a faith in systems thinking in the interests of the people – if they did not move fairly directly into high finance. Theorists made major contributions to education policy development, but the work involved was predominantly practical and instrumental in character – no doubt subtly informed by earlier critical perspectives.

Even the most distinguished theorists of education in South Africa might admit that educational theory has in general not recommended itself very highly to those who want to get on with making learning work. Fundamental pedagogics, which was used to give a touch of profundity to an authoritarian and discriminatory system, left at least two generations of South African educators either with distaste for theory or a capacity for empty jargon that gave theory a bad name.

Much of the theoretical or academic opposition to apartheid education, though given at times to powerful critique and analysis during the decline of apartheid, probably did some damage to the potential of theory to contribute to reconstruction. In the 1980s, much of the most interesting anti-government theoretical energy in education was spent on deconstruction, ideology critique, the analysis of the education system as an ideological state apparatus, and the undermining of reformist initiatives by analysing their 'technicist' features (their use of technical analysis to mask or ignore the fundamental political aspects of problems)[118]. A number of leading theorists aligned themselves with People's Education, working to give it some theoretical coherence.[119] Much of this theoretical work, especially from feminist and adult education perspectives, supported a sustained attack on (male) expertise whose intervention in the reality of 'the other' was illegitimate. What little empirical work there was came especially from progressive experimentation in the alternative education sectors. Its recommendations were to prove difficult to translate into practice in the world of mass schooling or training. If the theoretical endeavours touched educators and trainers at all, they were likely to have undermined their generally fragile confidence and low self-esteem.

There are various assumptions about the NQF that could have done with closer analysis. Here we are not concerned with what may be called strategic assumptions. These are dealt with elsewhere: the assumption that there would be one national department of lifelong learning; the expectation of policy breadth or uptake of NQF-supporting practices and provision beyond the NQF itself; the assumption that the NQF was responding to a broad base of public and professional enthusiasm for the progressive integration of education and training.

The aspects of the NQF that are under-theorised can be grouped broadly into two areas: theories of change and change management, and theories of learning. Here we can only point to what might have been given attention.

The theory of change in education is weakly developed. The clearest general finding is that deliberately striving for change against embedded systems and practices is difficult and slow at best[120] ; it often fails. Inasmuch as moderately successful theories are helpful, they apply to limited areas: strategies for school improvement in a particular country provide a notable example that has generated numerous approaches, all with some achievement. Doubts that theories which work in inner London schools are applicable to Africa do not stop them being followed, in the absence of alternatives.

[118] The pattern can be seen most clearly in the proceedings of the Kenton conferences of the late 1980s. The Kenton Conference was at that time the major annual gathering point for critical theorising about education.

[119] See Muller (1987) and Chisholm & Fuller (1996).

[120] See for example Christie (1999), Fleisch (2002) and various chapters in Chisholm (2004).

The implicit change theory of the South African NQF as it has emerged might be stated as follows:

1. Manipulating the structure of qualifications can help to turn education and training in desired directions.
2. Change can be promoted by focusing on frameworks that provide broad, agreed, flexible parameters for action by different agencies in different contexts.
3. All learning has general features, regardless of its levels, types, forms, intensity and contexts, which offer a sufficient frame of reference for orienting all change.
4. Maximum participation by stakeholders is essential to ensure buy-in, appropriateness and democracy.
5. The role of expertise (disciplinary or pedagogical) is secondary to the role of stakeholders, or can be provided by stakeholders.
6. The most suitable parameters for a qualifications framework are provided by agreed specified standards for the assessment of achievement. These should allow for flexible combinations and comparability.
7. Specified standards are not enough to achieve the desired effect. Rules of combinations of standards and specification of full qualifications are necessary.
8. Quality can be improved, with reliable and comparable results, by imposing a system of quality assurance. This involves accreditation and complex delegations of assessment and MoUs involving multiple specifications, including quality management systems, to be applied with appropriate adaptations across varied sectors.
9. The quality of qualifications can be made more just and relevant by being assessed without reference to the provider or the provision: it must be possible to assess experiential learning that falls outside of formal or institutional contexts of provision.
10. The system of relatively detailed prescription must be uniform across all sectors of approved learning in the country. Deviations from the principle can be allowed in sectors powerful enough to demand these, but every sector must adopt some features of the system.
11. Change can best be advanced in the particularly difficult political environment – that obviously demands a *Realpolitik* of survival – by an opportunistic mix of responsive flexibility at the top of the system with rigid application of regulatory requirements in day-to-day administration.

These implicit, emergent theoretical propositions have in many ways supported the continued functioning of the NQF, and achieved reasonable levels of compliance with at least some of its features almost everywhere that education or training is conducted in South Africa. And nearly every one of the propositions might stand up to theoretical scrutiny, depending on the nature and spirit of its elaboration into practice. Otherwise there is much here that is theoretically questionable, whether the questioning be conceptual or experiential. There are many ways in which these propositions have either not worked, or have not worked uniformly through provision, or have been problematic and even objectionable in practice. Several have been passionately contested. But it is difficult to find sustained theoretical investigations of any of them. Recent work is changing this picture in an extremely uneven manner.

In terms of the assumptions about learning, there has been a more sustained process of inquiry, though it has been highly localised.

The most interesting theoretical development has been stimulated by the assumption that the integration of education and training is both desirable and possible. The inquiry has centred on Bernstein's schema of horizontal (everyday, practical, weakly theorised) and vertical (theorised, disciplinary, institutional) orders of knowledge. Although Bernstein himself long ago pointed out that these were inextricably intertwined[121], local research has emphasised their difference and has at times claimed that they had no useful relationship. The argument has been used to rubbish the aspiration to parity of esteem across differences of forms of knowledge in a unitary qualifications framework. It has also been developed in an extraordinary resurgence of the authoritarian essentialism that post-modernism believed it had rendered untenable. In other words, it resorts to claiming access to privileged understanding of such things as 'the nature of knowledge'. However, although the horizontal/vertical argument looks suspiciously like an assertion of academic and schooling class interests, it is asserted within a respectable left tradition that has critiqued progressive assumptions about learning through work and play. This argues that the disadvantaged are further disadvantaged through the marginalising of theory by practice in schooling. It should be possible from within the NQF to develop a full argument in regard to this position that is much more nuanced than this thumbnail sketch shows.

A related body of theoretical critique has been offered against standards and outcomes-based education and train-

[121] Bernstein (1977). The highly problematic distinction between everyday experiential knowledge and theoretical schooling or academic knowledge has been pursued in a critical response to the NQF and OBE by Allais (2007), Breier (2004), Ensor (2003), Muller (2004) and others. For an alternative view on skill, knowledge and everyday experience see Dreyfus's (1996) discussion of Merleau-Ponty's 'phenomenology of embodiment'. A vital debate on related issues can be found in Michelson (2004) and Hugo (2005). For perhaps the most lucid account of the question, see Moll (2001).

ing. This shows a number of absurdities of the approach that seem to be all too common in the way it is enacted. It is clear that centrally prescribed outcomes can be fragmented and trivial and can fail in their aim to provide a basis for comparable assessment. The critics are capable of substantial illustration of these failings.[122] But their claim that the approach must inevitably be flawed in this way – that it is essentially flawed and not merely flawed in the contingencies of implementation – is less convincing. The critics are persuasive in criticising the complete separation of standards and outcomes development from curriculum development, actual instructional and assessment practices, and their distance for disciplinary concerns. However, if other parts of this study are correct, the separation is a matter of contingencies that have prevented the achievement of policy breadth. These contingencies relate to powerplay in the environment and to the directions into that implementation of the NQF have been pushed. They are in fact contrary to original design assumptions of the NQF.

The latest intended structure of the NQF seems to offer fresh and much-enhanced opportunities to develop the theoretical persuasiveness and differentiation of the system, precisely because the centre will no longer be required to exercise authority over a comprehensive and prescriptive order.

Properly developed in and for the NQF, theory would offer enhanced power in terms of being better attuned to the play of power, the deeper realities. It is not as clear that it would help much in the exercise of power, the official and institutional dimension, where regulation and effect seem most important. (Consider, for example, the SAQA Act, which is little more than theory, but is so solidified into statutory affirmations that theory necessarily disappears.) The sustaining of the NQF in terms of the exercise of power has far more to do with perceptions of effect as they reach top bureaucrats and politicians. This generally has little to do with theoretical considerations. However, the world of theory offers great possibilities for high-level gossip that can have either enhancing or destructive outcomes.

6.3.1 The world of progressive aspirations and pragmatism – a note

The NQF seeks the power of the moral and educational high ground of transformation. This is expressed especially through an appeal to the progressive tradition. These appeals are made particularly in the integrative intent, in the critical outcomes and in most features of the democratic principles of the NQF. Yet the power of this position is compromised in various ways. The NQF itself is ambiguously 'progressive'. Any prescriptive regulatory institution concerned mainly with certification must struggle to sustain a progressive identity. As we have seen, the credibility of progressive education has been challenged even on the politically progressive left. More damaging to the power of the NQF in the long run is the possibility that progressive thinking has very little purchase in the popular imagination. In spite of appearances, 'People's Education' had shallow roots in progressive values. This section briefly explores the history of the progressive aspirations.

Progressive aspirations are often held by dissenters or dissidents in reaction to the sterilities of conventional education, and may be treated as a kind of alternative common sense. Yet progressive thinking has distinguished credentials in the profounder forms of pragmatism.

Some of the key concerns within the NQF can be found in the theories of knowledge and education implicit in numerous religious traditions, and in debates about the nature of knowledge in Plato, Aristotle and the Sophists. These expressed differing views on the significance of experience on the one hand and contemplation on the other. It might be helpful to see the central issues in terms of vertical and horizontal forms of knowing.

Raw dichotomies in the understanding of knowledge

Vertical	Horizontal
reflection	action
contemplation	observation
reasoning	experience
simplification	complexity
aspiring to sublime understanding	aspiring to effective, virtuous behaviour
preoccupied with 'the big picture'	preoccupied with detail and technique
deduction	induction
disciplinary or schooling knowledge	integrated (project, performance), everyday experiential knowledge
theory	practice

[122] Allais (2007) devotes a chapter to showing the absurdities of unit standards. Because her procedures are designed to highlight the absurdities they miss many well-made and useful unit standards and make a good point with unnecessary absolutism.

The set of dichotomies is purely conceptual, and anyone applying their mind to the issues knows that the different aspects of knowing are inter-related in complex ways. However, there are very different ways of seeing the relationship. The Enlightenment and the scientific and industrial revolutions sharpened the differences, producing intensely held and influential positions on the priority of either reason or experience, and on the possibilities and limits of knowledge.

Pragmatism is a sophisticated and nuanced response to the apparent crisis in the understanding of knowledge. Pragmatism is rooted in the romantic reaction to rationalism and scepticism, and especially in Hegel's dialectic, which provides tools for transcending the dichotomies. Pragmatism emphasises the organic, if conflicting, relationship between the elements of the dichotomy. Given expression by Dewey, pragmatism was to provide a deep theoretical grounding for the progressive education movements of the 20th century. Progressive educational theory was to take numerous forms, from American playschools to early Soviet adult education (promoted by Lenin's wife, Krupskaya); from Paulo Freire's emancipatory pedagogics to constructivist theory and experiential learning; and even to practice and aspects of competency-based training. In South Africa it could be found in alternative education programmes and some aspects of People's Education. (Progressive theory and practice were also invoked and used in various ways within the apartheid education system, in spite of the official Fundamental Pedagogics).

At their best, progressive practices have emphasised how raw experience is transformed through the dialectic of reflection, action and reflection. In one school of educational thinking this was called 'praxis'. The term, which can mean merely 'practice', was commonly used in Marxism, and specifically used by Paulo Freire to mean the blending or fusing of theory and practice. ('Praxis' is used in not dissimilar ways in orthodox mysticism and liberation theology.)

Progressive thinking was given specific expression by Dewey's associate, Kilpatrick, whose 'project method' required a disciplined and systematic approach to learning. The term 'project' reflected the act of projecting intention into making (which included building models and writing essays) and the subsequent elaboration of the experience into more refined concepts. In no sense did it sideline 'pure knowledge' or 'knowledge for the sake of knowledge', but rather focused on the generation of knowledge through action. This in turn was not seen as mere doing, but in terms of the engaged and growing mind. Our understanding of how this works was deepened in the later 20th century by Bruner's theorising of the transformation of knowledge practices within schooling, the way we create significance out of our internalisation of external bodies of knowledge into generative rules for thinking about the world and ourselves, and the importance of 'relevance' (which he uses in a cognitive sense, not as responsiveness to economic needs).

Many educationists have been committed to 'the life of the mind' and to opposing deadening instruction and the inculcation of 'inert knowledge', without necessarily thinking of themselves as progressive. A traditional classroom or library dedicated to the silent pursuit of knowledge can very effectively promote lived learning that constantly transcends the vertical/horizontal dichotomy. What might distinguish selfconsciously progressive practice is the systematic structuring of tasks to promote intelligent (inter-)action, reflection and consolidation into knowledge, and the emphasis on higher cognitive skills rather than prescribed content. In this sense, progressive thinking is part of all recommended practices for modern classroom management or the planning of learning programmes.

Progressivism was to be consistently challenged by conservatives, who saw it as a threat to authority, order, discipline and the traditional curriculum. More seriously, it was threatened from within by various trivialising tendencies and unintended effects. Progressive methods have generally required teachers with a sophisticated grasp of the underlying theory and an ability to relate it to disciplinary content. In reality, poorly qualified teachers and poorly resourced contexts have led to the familiar situation of virtually meaningless projects: adult learners in functionless groups engaging in 'problematising' interaction with no perceivable cognitive benefit; children cutting out pictures from magazines, sticking them onto cardboard and making them look pretty with glitter; or youngsters 'analysing' the polluted water in a local stream without the basic microbiology or knowledge-accessing skills to make sense of the analysis.

American researchers have identified an excess of pseudo-progressive 'busy work' and too little mental engagement as a reason for the poor international performance of much schooling in the USA. In an ironical twist, then, progressive education has been open to being called conservative. In its manifestation in the more thoughtful forms of competency-based training and the use of standards and outcomes in the NQF, the progressive thrust is hedged about with ambiguity.

Progressivism has been found wanting by theorists who would normally be expected to endorse it. There is no necessary undercutting of the importance of 'high' subject matter in the masters of the dialectic. Hegel, Marx, Engels

and Lenin were rooted in and had great respect for the classical or bourgeois curriculum, while also having a certain respect for the forms of learning of ordinary working people in communal life and labour. (However, Marx's views on knowledge are complex: the way to knowledge was no longer through contemplation or learning, but through consciously striving to 'change the world'; yet he also saw that the learning that was possible in more organic pre-capitalist communities seemed much diluted in the repetitive de-skilled work and the degraded community of the industrial revolution.)

The most articulate proponent of a classical or disciplinary rather than a progressive project-oriented education for the working class was Gramsci, who was profoundly aware of the empowerment of the traditional intellectual and cultural disciplines in high bourgeois education and opposed progressive education reforms in the 1920s. Much later in the century, American revisionists of the history of education were to find evidence that progressive education probably kept the working class firmly 'in their place', intellectually, culturally and aspirationally disempowered. Yet the recognition of the power of classical bourgeois education had to live with the irony of accepting the deep embedding of received orders and power in that education.[123]

An implicit rather than explicit aspect of progressive theory lies in the romanticism of craft and work and the related faith in the meaningfulness of learning through work. This is a view that is probably held more keenly by intellectuals than by workers. Hegel's serf has an intimate concrete knowledge of the real world and knows the master's land and goods better than the master, while the master holds the abstract science of power. Their interaction and especially their conflict create new forms of knowledge, but until this is resolved it also creates false consciousness. (A much less optimistic picture can be found in Yeats's poetry, in which the opposites and the conflict of daily experience and high culture are potentially destructive and trivialising, and ultimately tragic. Yeats is a conservative romantic.)

In romantic revolutionary thinking, it is not the typical industrial labourer who learns in the factory, which blunts intelligence, but the craftsman, the tradesman and the apprentice who are striving for mastery of a deep skill. The post-Fordist transformation of the modern workplace may allow for romanticism to extend plausibly to the contemporary 'intelligent' factory, but this extension is problematic where such transformation has not happened or is only a matter of appearance. The issue has had serious implications for the NQF.

There has been a covert assumption in South African educational thinking that progressive thinking is popular. This was fostered especially by the alternative movements. Progressive ideas were most clearly opposed to the authoritarian features of apartheid education: to the rows of learners, passive or chanting in response to the transmission of knowledge prescribed from above and processed through a teacher-centred teacher. Parents and learners, trainers and teachers (once liberated from the oppressive structure) would gravitate spontaneously towards progressive practices.

This expectation was based on a caricature of what happened in the typical classroom. The traditional classroom, with its sometimes silent attention to the object of study in a task or a textbook, came to seem enviable in retrospect in contrast to unfocused group work and noisy creativity in the ill-conceived implementation of resource-free outcomes-based education run by teachers who had no concrete experience or training in the project method. While there was little resonance for this kind of progressive practice, it is likely that the conventional classroom is more an object of aspiration. There were fine projects in mission and liberal education efforts in South Africa in the 1930s and 1940s that had admirable local effects under an inspired leader, but failed to have any general effect.[124] The community-based pronouncements on People's Education were all related to denial of access to good formal schooling, illegitimate structures of authority, oppressive governance and the use of the school as a site of contestation and confrontation in the struggle.

Freirean conscientisation of adults as an approach to alternative popular education and skills development generally fell on stony ground. There is virtually no popular articulation of what could be considered a serious progressive aspiration. The same is reflected in political pronouncements by the ANC after 1990.[125] ANC leaders sent their chil-

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[123] Gramsci (1973) shows the analysis of an 'organic' intellectual of the highest order, but as the editor (Lawner) points out, his thought is highly coloured by his own experience of the hard work and dedication a working class/peasant boy needed to rise above his circumstances through education. The American critiques can be found in Bowles & Gintis (1976) and Violas (1978).

[124] This point was made vividly by the late Franz Auerbach in his observations on the emerging NQF. He was involved in progressive alternative educational efforts in South Africa from the 1940s. The observation can clearly be grasped from Malherbe (1981).

[125] See for example Mandela's first address in Soweto after his release in 1990. This gives selective acknowledgements to struggle action. ANC education policy (when not strongly linked to Cosatu's influence) is muted on qualifications. (ANC/Cosatu 1993; ANC 1994, CEPD 1994 and NECC 1993). Between the lines is a concern with the restoration of formal schooling, not an educational revolution. Supporting the following discussion are accounts in personal communications from those in exile with the ANC, which indicate the kind of aspiration to the best formal education and a lack of progressive educational influence. This was as much the case in Eastern Europe as in the UK. The experience of the ANC's Solomon Mahlangu school in Tanzania is sensitively researched in Morrow et al. (2004).

dren to the best private schools (many of which, ironically, had the resources and sophistication to put progressive practices into being). The ANC elite in exile showed no keenness for educational experimentation in their private lives in Western or Eastern Europe. Most strikingly, the typically progressive and integrative project of Education with Production at the ANC's model school in Tanzania was a decided failure. Young people who had escaped from the township schools of South Africa had no real interest in the practical skills on offer, and were seen as a nuisance by those running the farm or workshops. The liberated South African would have an academic schooling. If new education officials adopted progressive notions after 1994, it was all too often as rhetoric learned (at best) in university programmes without the benefit of practical experience, or because they were taught in progressive ways or had seen progressive methods practised in context.

The progressive aspirations of the NQF were thus not a strong foundation for power. It could be argued, however, that the institutionalisation of progressive practices and requirements in the new regulatory environment has created situations in which attention to progressive principles is obligatory. The fact that this may at times be mere compliant lip-service could be seen as the flip side of some rare transformation of instructional practice.

6.3.2 The world of words, words, words …

The generative power of the word is celebrated in religion, poetry and philosophy. Words and the metaphors we make of them can create ways of seeing things and their relationships anew, and allow us to imagine and enact change. But they are also treacherous.

The fluid understanding of NQF terminology is a source of power and adaptation to different contexts, but also a major problem. The power and the problem are rooted in the nature and politics of language communication and in the politics and sheer scope of the NQF. In this section we look briefly at the problem through the lens of pragmatics (a term that shares little of its meaning with the term 'pragmatism' used in the last section).

Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that concerns itself with how we understand one another – with the dynamics of meaning in context. Even a limited acquaintance with pragmatics leads makes one wonder how we ever manage to understand one another. Our everyday communications are moment-by-moment miracles that are lost to us in our common-sense acceptance of what we are doing.[126]

Pragmatics shows how our normal utterances are tissues of ambiguity. Our minds are perpetually engaged in 'disambiguating' in order to make sense. To do this, we blend many complex bits of knowledge: our consciousness of our own identity, our 'reading' of the individuals we are communicating with, our grasp of where they are coming from, our responses to their tone and stance, our awareness of context, our memory of what has just been said and of the whole background of culture or disciplinary references lying behind what is being said.

As with epistemology or linguistic philosophy, pragmatics increases our understanding of how we make meaning. It also leads to an awe-struck realisation of how little we understand. Utterances are powerful constructors of 'subjects'. These can be our identity as individuals, or the identity of the communities in which 'we live and move and have our being', or what we consider to constitute the curriculum and what we don't. In spite of this formative power, words are generally much weaker than we think they are at pinning down reality.

It is thus difficult – ultimately impossible – to say exactly what we think, know what we 'really believe' or be sure of what is right, except perhaps in very trivial instances. However, we generally manage quite well because we communicate in well-established communities of practice. It is only when we move into utterly strange communities that our ability to make sense breaks down and is only built up again once we integrate into the new community. Even more important, we communicate much more successfully and completely when we give examples. When we describe our castles in the air to one another, we can end up with vastly different pictures – Timbuktu or Buckingham Palace. A drawing or a concrete model, and the experience of living in an example of the real thing, help greatly, although explaining why we value the experience is still problematic. Our explanations are bound to be different because of our very different life experiences and our different communities. (The history of the NQF shows that, for various reasons, instantiation, exemplars and modelling were very seldom used. I consider possible reasons for this in various places in this study. Pictures of practice have only emerged well into the reality of implementation, and

126 See especially Sperber & Wilson (1986) for a profound account of the pragmatics of communication. While they have multiple empirical perspectives on language, Ryle (1963) approaches it from an analytical direction.

even there the opportunities to create persuasive profiles of the NQF at work have been scarce. Yet feedback suggests that, within cohesive learning fields, the NQF values and principles are being enacted in interesting ways.)

There are, then, huge challenges in creating communities of understanding and practice that are based on genuinely shared meanings in a situation in which there is sweeping social change. These challenges are acute where deliberate attempts are made, usually through official policy, to shape the response to this change into new forms and relationships. This is all the more difficult when that change is focused on a generous and humane intention to increase inclusivity on a massive scale, such as we have experienced in South Africa.

Under such circumstances a case may be made for fairly brutal 'decisionism' that imposes carefully made, relatively simple and manageable expert systems on the society.[127] These may link into existing systems and well-known concepts even where radical change is being attempted. Such an approach need not be undemocratic if the public or the clients of the system are free to reject or change the system within a reasonably short term.

For complex historical reasons and perhaps for the good in the long term, South Africa took an inclusive route involving high levels of participation by stakeholders and users from very different contexts and communities. This not only required trade-offs of all kinds, but also the creation of new concepts, or the insertion of repressed old concepts into new contexts. This has led to an experience rather like negotiating an extraordinarily complex web of pragmatic effects, where mutual intelligibility falls through the gaps while the participants politely fail to notice that agreements on meanings have been made without actual understanding.

Careful scholarship has shown the extent to which this happened throughout the development of the NQF.[128] It is perhaps not surprising that, when opposing interests agree to share meanings and intentions, there are inevitable slips into unacknowledged mutual incomprehension and occasional shows of bad faith. One might expect such a result of imperfectly negotiated meanings when, for example, labour and management, or professional and occupational interests, or theorists and practitioners come to agreement. What is surprising is the extent to which one finds similar effects within one sector – and especially among the multiple players on the side of the angels in the struggle against apartheid.

We often talk of 'agreeing to disagree'. What analysis of the adoption of the NQF shows is a systemic need in the process of change to 'agree to agree' for the sake of moving forward – without really agreeing. These agreements to assume that you mean the same thing by the same words are used to link very different interests which have broad shared objectives but very different perspectives and concerns. In the process new identities may be created, but these may prove very fragile when the assumed agreements are implemented.

The resultant problems of this weakly-established identity may be readily hammered out in practice when the project involved is of limited scope and short duration. When it involves comprehensive, prescriptive system-wide new directions needing huge investments in each step, this hammering out is likely to be unsatisfactory. In some ways this is what has happened with the NQF.

What happens then in implementation may be chains of category mistakes. A category mistake occurs when a concept is applied to a context or a field of meaning for which it was not originally intended. For example, if I talk of 'purple prose', meaning that the writing is extravagant, and you act on the assumption that I am talking about the colour of the font, we have a potentially serious category mistake. Ryle, the philosopher who invented the term, used it to criticise the kind of thinking that used the 'clockwork' model to explain the working of the mind. In one of his illuminating explanations of the term, a foreigner is trying to understand cricket. Having been shown what the bowler and the batsman do, he asks, in effect, 'Who does the team spirit that is such an important part of cricket?' The idea that team spirit is of the same order as bowling or batting is a category mistake.

In the case of the NQF, the category mistakes are sometimes strong and sometimes subtle or latent. They thrive in an environment where there is an unsustainable faith in definition. Philosophers have very clearly established the

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[127] An example of what I understand as 'decisionism' is in decisions about the equivalence of two different subjects when designing the rules of combination for an examination. Thoughtful judgements and comparisons help, but there is no way of objectively deciding that achievements in Geography and History are equivalent, let alone achievements in Mathematics and Fine Arts. In the last resort, feasibility demands that one be able to say 'it has been decided' (preferably 'agreed').

[128] Most notably that of Lugg (2007), who shows the extent of differences on questions of the NQF not only between sectors but within sectors.

limits of language, and are amply supported by practical experience. Wittgenstein, Ryle and post-structuralist thinkers show in very different ways that our access to the truth or ultimate meaning of a term is deeply flawed. Exercises in definition are necessary in legal, administrative and scientific processes, but are always provisional, situated and requiring to be illustrated by cases. (Wittgenstein called this 'ostensive definition', which means pointing out examples.)

A primal category error in the NQF lies in the treatment of its multiple concepts and terms as though they were capable of an absoluteness and clarity that is impossible. In the formative period of the NQF many warnings were given about limiting the degree of specification, and using the specification as a starting point for negotiating and developing the living meaning of the requirement.[129] There is a shift to a sense of having access to the only true meaning of a provision, as though it were a material instrument – note, indeed, the use of 'instrument' as though it were not notional but something like a pair of pliers or a computer. This shift comes about for various reasons: some of the founding enthusiasts of the NQF treated its concepts as though they had a direct line to the gods of standards and quality assurance. Although this direct line brought nuanced and sophisticated messages, the assumption of certainty did damage to sense.

Bureaucratic rationality, or the sheer demands on officials running a complex system, pushes nuanced, situated meanings into crude absolutes. (Category errors sometimes take on the character of a reductio ad absurdam.) There can be little doubt that providers, especially when they lack confidence or are inclined to authoritarian positions (the two are often linked), demand clarity and certainties of specification and procedure. Practitioners sometimes have a touching faith in the given definitions of new terminology, and often ignore their own instincts of practice to try to use these 'correctly'. Rigidly fitting what they and their learners do into 'demonstrated outcomes' or using judgments such as 'competent/not yet competent' when finer grading would work much better, are cases in point. It becomes easy to imagine 'benchmarks' turning into procrustean beds.[130] It may not necessarily be the fault of the definitions, but it is something that has happened in the NQF. On the whole these problems come from the easiest NQF category, which is to treat a unit standard as a syllabus rather than a guide to assessment.

Imagine, then, that the key abstractions of the NQF are on a three-dimensional matrix. Terms like 'quality, standards, integration, assessment (criterion), generic assessor, learning field, level descriptor' would appear on one axis. They might be joined by terms that seem clear until one starts working with them, like 'demonstrating', 'working together', or 'accessing information' or seeing the world as 'a set of related systems'. On the second axis are areas of concern in education and training: education and training policy, central management, site management, classroom management, curriculum, pedagogics, didactics, assessment. On the third axis are the many worlds of the NQF (not all are reflected in this study). The result is a cubiod framework of thousands of spaces. Each space could be the locus for a shift in nuance or a category error. These might, in context, be either positive or negative, but either way would be a source of confusion.

Take as just one example the idea of 'assessment criteria'. The very nature of an assessment criterion in a unit standard in boilermaking might appear different from the point of view of the engineer inspecting a job with a very clear understanding of quality standards, and a practical trainer instructing initial-level candidates. Here, at least, clear descriptions and ostensive definition should be possible, though one should never assume that even apparently simple mechanical performances are free of cultural and interpretive dimensions. However, when one moves an assessment criterion for 'reading with meaning', one may be faced with a qualitatively different notion of assessment criteria. In turn, this will be used differently by a team of specialists in applied linguistics and a practical Grade 1 classroom teacher. This problem can lead to endless and rather fruitless disputation in SGBs, especially when stakeholders of very different persuasions are involved.[131]

Another example is extreme dedication to the idea of 'contextualised learning'. To treat this not as a qualitative pointer but as an absolute gives trainers carte blanche to ignore the noncontextual elements of knowledge. The same applies to NQF-stimulated reflections on the differences between summative, formative and continuous assessment.

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[129] See Footnote 114 on Prof. Michael Young's role.

[130] Another insight owed to Melissa King.

[0131] This point was contributed by Melissa King. Vorwerk (2005) shows how important it is to have a grasp of standards that is both precise and complex. From a considerable depth of experience in working with the idea of standards, Erik Hallendorf is extremely cautious about inexpert participation in the process (personal communication).

These should be akin to the family names for almost aesthetic professional judgements made within communities of practice; instead they become the basis for doctrinaire assertion or disputation.

Further examples could be supplied for multiple dimensions of the NQF. The issue is not raised to suggest that the whole effort of clarification and classification is misbegotten. Trade-offs are inevitable between central procedures for specification and regulation on the one hand, and the reality of real-life performances in the multitude of competencies required in a modern society on the other. And acts of specification and clarification are essential moments – but only moments – in the development of quality and standards.

The problem is a common one in development and change and is brought to crisis when the system is comprehensive, prescriptive and committed to a narrowly defined set of standardised procedures. It is then that the problem of category mistakes undermines credibility and workability and becomes disempowering. Alternatively, acts of definition and specification may have been more powerful and fruitful if there had been greater success in achieving policy breadth and coherence[132] and wide-ranging investments in curriculum, materials and institutional development. Reasons why this did not happen are explored elsewhere in this study.

[132] Policy coherence is dealt with in King (1998) and Kraak (2004b).

7. POSTSCRIPTS

7.1 Drawing some conclusions

Educational policy and the generation of innovative practices – whether conservative or progressive – may be seen as attempts to overcome profoundly intractable problems in education and the nature of knowledge. Experience suggests that these attempts must inevitably fail in some ways, but they are also essential and inescapable: the alternative would not be happily sustained continuity but stagnation – at least within the flux of modernity.

The scope of the sustained investment of intelligence, time, finances and passion in the building of the South African NQF over the past 20 years is humbling, whatever one's view of the NQF. Educators, trainers, thinkers, activists, labour leaders, leaders in industry and the academic world, managers and facilitators in learning programmes, Cabinet ministers and politicians have given their energies – sometimes very intensively indeed – to conceptualising, designing and running the NQF. This has been at the material cost of the employers of many of those who have participated in a voluntary capacity, of international donors, of the education and training budgets and of the Skills Levy.

Such multipartite commitment was driven by vision and hope – and power. Or rather, one must use the plural if there is any possibility of understanding the process. It was driven by visions, hopes and powers. For, as we have seen, the NQF draws on and reaches into many arenas of South African life – perhaps into all – and its architects, builders and advocates have seen it through very different lenses, trusting that the structures growing out of the visions would lead to desperately needed transformation in very different aspects of education and training in South Africa, and indeed, in the very fabric of the nation. The successes and failures of the NQF are inevitably tied to the conceptual quality and predictive validity of the visions, the hopes and the effectiveness of the play of powers – and especially to the ever-present plurality.

To an outsider the visions and hopes and the play of powers must seem strange. Why and how could something as dry and apparently limited as the bureaucratic organisation of the requirements and rules for officially recognised qualifications in South Africa be the object of such extravagant expectations? However, this study has had no difficulty in showing the power of the vision behind the NQF.

The second, perhaps more important, question relates to the attempt to appreciate the achievements of the NQF, but also to understand why it has taken forms that have disappointed and alienated many of the original architects and builders. Some aspects of the NQF leave it vulnerable to attack, or to being ignored and dismissed by the closely related agencies involved in implementing it. And yet, at the same time, these aspects are loyally, doggedly supported by many who believe in the NQF's promise, even when they do not endorse every direction that has been taken. In addition, many of the NQF's requirements are taken seriously and valued by organisations and institutions around the country.

The question of why innovations or changes in societies are adopted, and why they flourish or fail, is surprisingly difficult to answer; if it were easier, we might be able to dispense with notions like enterprise, trial and error and risk.

Any attempt to understand the NQF must be framed in terms of the possibilities and constraints within the nexus of influence and the range of boundary conditions. These were fluid yet formative. The evaluation of the NQF is constantly haunted by the questions: What else could we have done? How much better have alternative approaches worked in South Africa or in similar contexts abroad? Is what we have now not, perhaps, headed towards the best we may possibly have – given contexts that are daunting on account of both intractable structures and shifting conditions?

Historicist theories of change allow for interpretations ranging from helplessness before the inevitability of underlying forces to the formless play of chance and influence, or the indeterminate play of power in discourse. In between we may find some possibilities for individual and institutional agency and intentions. The NQF can seem like a juggernaut moving under its own steam, or a little skiff at the mercy of political whim or shifting interests. These vehicles, insuperable or frail, are driven by the will of individuals, yet as the drivers manipulate the tiller or the steering wheel, they seem to be forced along submerged paths that they cannot see, and can do little to change. But even the sense of these inevitable but hidden paths is brought into doubt by moments of personal or institutional wilfulness, cussedness or sheer serendipity, which seem to shift the vehicle onto another hidden path.

All these perspectives and considerations help to explain why the NQF took on features that were seen as defining

virtues and yet have proven problematic. In describing them it is essential to acknowledge that our accounts have the benefit of hindsight. Some of the observations in this study, for example those pointing to possible strategic errors, see results that were difficult or impossible to see from the point of view of the actors at the time. Those of us who participated in or observed some of the deciding moments of the NQF were often aware of the vulnerability of the decisions. We were conscious of how things might go wrong, and of the imperfection of the option taken, yet we also knew a decision had to be made, and that this was done in what seemed the best hope after careful consideration.

In many cases, as in any political action seen from an adult perspective, individuals or institutions made the decision to go along with decisions directed by the most influential players in the general interest, even when the detail was not what they would have chosen. No major decision about the NQF has been taken without considerable deliberation (though, as we have seen, the deliberation was undertaken against a background of very little research, trialling or experience). As in any act of investment, the acts of persuasion and the risks taken were not purely rational. The play of histories, interests, party loyalties, ideological positions and individual lives – and the dynamic and inertia present in any social situation – were intensely alive. This point is rather obvious, but is made necessary by the observations of some younger critics who express themselves as though the objects of their critique – which is often useful and valid but never absolutely just – were the products of avoidable poor judgement.

The problematic features of the NQF – each with its positive and negative aspects – and their causes and effects is best represented as a spiky, entangled dialectic incorporating numerous cycles or spirals or helixes all playing into one another. However, they might be summarised as follows:

7.1.1. Ambition and comprehensiveness

The huge ambition and the comprehensiveness of scope of the NQF was the result of an awareness of the interlinked nature of the causes of the nation's poverty in all the competencies needed by an upwardly-mobile modern society. It was also a product of the desperate need to make a dramatic difference in a short time. Policy symbolism was unavoidable after 1994 when modest and sober little steps away from ways of doing things under apartheid would have looked embarrassingly inadequate. However, the level of ambition was also the product of positioning and powerplay, aimed at asserting a particular vision of the educational future that was decidedly not held by some powerful stakeholders in the change. This was ultimately damaging to the NQF. At a more specific level, comprehensiveness seemed to be the only way to solve intractable problems relating to the nature and status of vocational and technical education.

7.1.2. Detailed prescriptiveness

The reasons for the detailed prescriptiveness of the NQF lay in similar factors. Prescriptiveness may also be attributed to a certain desperation to act in the face of major fissures and lack of trust across participating sectors, agencies and interest groups. There was also a need to back intention with specific actionable requirements in the face of the failure of required levels of political will, state authority and financial backing. This failure was partly linked to the shift to neo-liberal economic and social policy. The model might have been more open-ended with the financial and professional capacity to act out developmental interventions, but it became increasingly prescriptive because of limited capacity.

7.1.3. Integration

The factors at play in strengthening the emphasis on integration were intrinsic and extrinsic. The intrinsic factors relate both to time-honoured concerns in education and training for the integration of theory and practice, or mind and hand. There was also a passionately held belief that both academic education and vocational/technical training had been diminished in vitality and effectiveness by their separation under apartheid and their relationship to class formation and maintenance. Somewhere between intrinsic and extrinsic was a preoccupation on the part of both labour and management with the poor employability and competitiveness of the human resources yielded by schooling and training in South Africa, especially with the prospect of the economy opening up to global competition.

Extrinsically, the demand for systemic integration was part of the strategic high ground that labour, or a section of labour, occupied for some time in its attempt to exercise a deciding influence over the provision of education. More generally, integration was a politically pleasing flag to fly because it spoke to the broader struggle against segregation and *baasskap*. The resistance of academics and new education officialdom to systemic integration was anticipated, but its ferocity and positional power were not foreseen by the protagonists of the NQF.

7.1.4. Policy incoherence

Policy incoherence surrounding the NQF, and specifically the location of the NQF in relation to the Ministries and Departments of Labour and Education, has been a major and not easily intelligible problem. The NQF should have been in a position of considerable virtue as a functional integrating link between education and labour (training). However, given a history of animosity reaching back to the equivalent apartheid ministries through the 1980s (*mannekrag* equalling *verlig* versus *onderwys* equalling *verkramp*)[133] , the failure of the expected unification of these ministries in 1994 meant that the NQF came into being in a compromised institutional position. This left it in the crossfire of an undeclared war between very different stakeholder orientations and ultimately a victim of the triumph of the academic/centralist tendency over the vocational/devolutionary tendency (which had been in the ascendancy in the early years of the NQF). It is difficult to know whether to attribute policy incoherence to oversight, legislative inexperience, lack of capacity or deliberate intent.

7.1.5. Labyrinthine complexity

The original idea of an NQF appealed to some because of its elegant simplicity, especially compared to the apartheid structures it would replace. Yet, especially if one includes the actual complex of regulations and procedures for registering and quality assuring credits and qualifications, for accrediting and funding by a multitude of ETQAs and the range of practices in band ETQAs, and for establishing and running learnerships, the NQF seems explicable only with reference to chaos theory. (The term ‘chaos theory’ comes from the fact that the systems that the theory describes are apparently disordered, but chaos theory is really about finding the underlying order in apparently random data. This phenomenon, common to chaos theory, is also known as ‘sensitive dependence on initial conditions’. In information theory, chaos theory is used to understand the impact on the whole of a random variable.)

In the case of the NQF, major factors that were necessary for it to work were wiped out in the political process. It is possible to see the incremental complexity of the NQF as a function of the early loss of political, financial and positional backing, plus the need to assert the power of regulation where reliance on communication and trust had proved impossible. However, prescriptive complexity and pre-emptive regulation may also be functions of aspects of the logic of the final model adopted and of a coercive tendency in some of the early implementers of the NQF (who were intent on forcing business and HE to provide redress through quality education and training, whether they liked it or not).

7.1.6. Aspects of inappropriate technology

The NQF enjoyed life-giving inputs from other countries, notably Scotland, New Zealand and Australia, at a time when the ideas involved were untested and tenuous even in those countries. However, their influence, based on different assumptions about capacities, cultures of provision, scope and need, could be regarded as poorly digested in the detail of South African design and implementation. This weakness is the product of another complex dynamic, with factors ranging from a genuine but in some respects naive sharing of the infectious international enthusiasm for the emerging vision of NQFs, to the understandable need of South Africa’s newly-emerging elite to grasp and adapt ready-made models that were not designed by white South Africans. There was also the optimistic desire to assert the country’s potential to be competitive in a ‘developed-world’ context. This made it difficult to consider local contextual limitations. (There are some interesting parallels in the adoption by South Africa of New Zealand’s system for VAT.)

7.1.7. Lack of research, trialling or concrete scenario planning

NQF thinking chronically failed to include detailed, toughly-imagined scenario planning envisaging how the NQF would work in concrete contexts of application – to conceptualise how it would look to participants ‘from below’, to examine the feasibility of the management and administration it would entail, the long-term costs of implementation for all participants and so on. A persuasive major study suggests this may be attributed to the perceived need for rapid effects in a situation where unity of action could only be sustained through commitment to flagged abstractions. The unity of support was stretched in fragile agreements across very disparate positions. It could collapse if the abstractions were analysed into their practical implications. The effect was also maintained by a felt pressure to be academically respectable in terms of a strange notion of ‘academic’ that has seemed embarrassed by reduction to

[133] ‘Manpower equalling liberal and education equalling conservative’.

the world of the experiential and anecdotal where policies actually play out. (This is illustrated by the studious avoidance of the kind of vernacular exemplification and case histories used in the Scottish NQF.)

7.1.8. The distorting pre-eminence of unit standards in the image of the NQF

The meaning and intentions of the NQF are poorly represented through their narrow association with the ideas of unit standards and outcomes-based education, and more particularly with the form and effect that these took on within the context of the NQF. Although unit standards constitute an important administrative mechanism within the NQF, neither their existence nor the highly specified form they have taken is necessary or sufficient to the broader values and principles of the NQF. Nonetheless, they are the product of the somewhat contradictory imperatives that the NQF be broad, flexible and responsive and yet actionable and enforceable. The urgency of these contradictory needs was in turn a product of global pressures and a certain failure of political will behind the NQF. Ironically the commitment to OBE became a discrediting factor, mainly because of the way the DoE designed and implemented OBE in a mode that can readily be seen as defiance of the NQF.

As indicated above, these eight features of the NQF's development are not well represented when catalogued as they are here. They are not linear or prioritised, but tightly interwoven. The account that follows should clarify the line of the argument.

7.2 A synopsis of the drama[134]

The play of contextual and political factors in the ongoing making and unmaking of the NQF in South Africa is highly complex. A useful heuristic at this point is to frame the story in the style of the plot synopsis of an opera with a Byzantine libretto. Those who read such notes know they are a very inadequate representation of the machinations of the characters, the gorgeous harmonies and agonising disharmonies, the shifts of key, the brilliant but sometimes shaky sets of the actual production.

There are two main wheels of fortune that move the NQF.

In the years of revolution and transition (roughly 1988-1997) the great wheel of the productive sector – labour and management – was in the ascendancy. Here, though, there were wheels within wheels: the great wheel stood broadly for the responsiveness of learning to the economy; one smaller wheel (the labour sector) wanted to demand and enforce disciplined but voluntary participation by state, business and civil society in the provision of a redemptive education. (The contradictions in this statement are deliberate.) The other smaller wheel (the private sector) wanted provision by market incentives, lightly guided by centrally-set standards. Neither of the smaller wheels was as strong as it looked, each being cracked by its own dissent from the vision, or its indifference to the precise machinery so passionately pursued by NQF insiders.

Furthermore they were beset by historic ironies. Of the smaller wheels, labour gained the ascendancy in the early legislative phase of the new South Africa, only to lose out with the inescapable capitulation of government to the dynamics of inherited economic problems and the triumph of neoliberal policies over social democracy in the same phase. (At the same time the union movement was being weakened by the departure of much of its leadership into government or business.) The small wheel of the private sector gained through the same process, but was alienated by the continuing centralist trajectory pursued by the labour interest within the NQF.

At the same time, the education sector was at a nadir of power and influence over its own or national affairs in the early transitional years. Against the tendency of the productive sector, however, it could claim the allegiance of those who favoured the idea that the future government should mobilise all the organs of state and society centrally in order to shape the transformational education system. On the whole, educationists and centralists were only marginally interested in the responsiveness of learning to the economy. Until the intensive policy-making phase associated with NEPI and the CEPD, this tendency was on a very low arc. The wheel only began to turn upward with the move of many comrades from the struggle into Schoeman Street (the national headquarters for the formal, official provision of education). Here, whatever the stance they brought with them, they were obliged to take on the mantle of the old bureaucracy, overwhelmed by the demands of merely maintaining the huge schooling system, not to mention the scarcely manageable tasks of amalgamating the chaotic structures of apartheid education into one department and restructuring Higher Education. In spite of these difficulties, their wheel moved gradually into the ascendancy in terms of curriculum policy and quality assurance, with the sector determined to maintain its autonomy and

[134] Observations about revolution here are influenced by Marcuse (1960), Rudé (1964), Furet & Richet (1965), Hill (1970) and Tomalin (2003) among others.

central control over these matters, especially against the demands of the productive sector. (At the same time, the bureaucratic centralists of education were severely challenged in terms of other areas of management: the power of the provinces against the centre and the constitutional and market-oriented protection of private provision limited their influence, making them all the more determined to have total control of curriculum matters.)

However, the powerful political symbolism of the NQF and the significant but differently located power of the productive sector did not allow the institution to be jettisoned, but required that it be hedged in and limited as far as possible to the domain of the productive sector. With the wheels of fortune of both sectors moderately high, while the position of the NQF was relatively low in national priorities, the result was an enduring stalemate.

We wait to see how the actors line up at the end of the present act of the NQF.

Footnote: In the original script it was intended that the two sectors – production and education – be married at the start of the second act. This would have made all the difference. Why it did not happen seems to have been the effect of action offstage.

7.3 A last thought: reason, revolution and the South African NQF[135]

The three regicidal revolutions of Europe, in England, France and Russia, all ended in apparent failure, rapidly replacing short-lived ideals with anarchy, war, terror, coercion and reaction, followed by the restoration of older forms of authority. But whatever the level of apparent restoration, there can be little doubt that each of these revolutions left its society, and ultimately the whole world, utterly changed.

What could not be undone after the revolutions was the move into modernity, with – for better or for worse – new levels of rationalisation and bureaucracy, new forms of law, newly effective authority for the state, and advanced techniques for management in the hands of broadened elites.

South Africa has gone through a protracted revolution with no official executions of its rulers, but with massive changes in governance. Even where these changes have not fully taken hold and where their finely worked out rationality has clashed with the myriad accepted practices of a highly complex society, they have changed ‘normal’ ways of thinking about how things should be done. Many of these changes have brought about improvements, or pointed in directions that are great improvements on the past.

The NQF exemplifies within its various worlds some of the common patterns of revolutions. It is now being changed into a structure that may look to some like post-revolutionary restoration. However, the NQF has institutionalised different ways of thinking about knowledge, competence and skills within the society, and provided new ways of managing projects concerned with these matters. Some aspects may have fallen rapidly into empty formalism and have fed the inevitable forces of reaction. But many new ways of ordering our thinking about quality in learning and taking the improvement of quality seriously have been established, and must endure even when the specific practices with which they are associated have been changed or set aside. In one way or another, these new ways are now critical tools in the thinking of tens of thousands of individuals and in the practices of most major institutions of learning in South Africa. The new form of the NQF offers important opportunities for ensuring that these tools are used well.

Nothing short of a skills revolution by a nation united will extricate us from the crisis we face. We are addressing logjams, some of which are systemic and therefore in some cases entrenched even in post-apartheid South Africa. The systemic nature of some of our challenges undermines our excellent new policies, at least in the short term, hence the need for interventions such as JIPSA to enhance implementation of our policies. (Speech by the Deputy President of the Republic of South Africa, 27 March 2006, after a decade of the NQF and the NSDS).

All things fall and are built again,
And those that build them again are gay (WB Yeats: *Lapis Lazuli*).

Love is the seed in you of every virtue
And of all acts deserving punishment (Virgil to Dante, in *Purgatoria xvii*).

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[135] This synopsis owes most to Lugg (2007) and Fataar (2006).

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