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Tensions between System and Lifeworld: The Imposition of a National Qualifications Framework on the Humanities in South Africa

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Abstract

This paper examines the effects of the imposition of a new Higher Education and Training dispensation on academics working in the Humanities disciplines at South African Universities. It uses Habermas' two concepts of 'system' and 'lifeworld' to try to make sense of current tensions experienced by many of these academics. It argues that both the demands of the system and of the lifeworld needs of its practitioners may be accommodated within the different moments of the curriculum action-research cycle, but that this will require very careful planning by those involved in establishing quality assurance systems both at the institutional and national levels.

The Policy Context

Higher Education and Training (HET) the world over has been forced to respond to the demands placed on the sector by two late modern imperatives, globalisation and the massification of education. The former implies key changes in technology, work organisation and skill formation requiring high levels of generic skill at all levels of work; which in turn have resulted in "the dilution of the previously rigid boundaries that have constituted the education and training sectors since the rise of modern industrialism" (Kraak, 1998:6). Sometimes referred to as the 'new vocationalism', this integration of education and training includes a concern to remove what are considered to be functionally obsolete distinctions between theory and practice, knowledge and skill and mental and manual labour. Linked to these changes in the workplace and preparation for the workplace, is the emergence of 'Mode 2 knowledge' where knowledge is produced beyond the traditional confines of the university and the academic disciplines by inter-disciplinary teams. Late modern problem-solving is increasingly characterized by inter-disciplinary collaboration in contexts of application resulting in the hybridisation of knowledge production (see Gibbons et al., 1994).

"These changes have led to a blurring of the distinction between science and technology and to a dilution of the previously rigid boundaries between the functions of universities, colleges and technikons" (Kraak, 1998:10).

In South Africa the massification of HET has a particularly moral dimension, as it implies the need to respond to the gross historical inequalities of the past, by making the HET sector accessible to previously disadvantaged black, and working class communities. This requires the system to be more open, flexible and responsive to the needs of under-prepared, adult, lifelong and part-time learners.

These contextual imperatives have forced policy-makers in South Africa to try to steer the HET system away from an elite, divided system resulting in social differentiation to one which will be open and unified with diluted boundaries and which will serve (or at least be seen to serve) the national reconstruction and skills development agenda. To this end a suite of policy documents have been produced since 1994 under the African National Congress government; the most pertinent for this paper being the South African Qualifications Act (October, 1995), the [National Commission on Higher Education Report \(August, 1996\)](#) and [White Paper 3, A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education and Training \(July, 1997\)](#). The NCHE Report highlighted the need for greater relevance and coherence across the HET sector and suggested that this could be achieved via the state's steering of the system through three-year rolling plans linked to funding mechanisms, via a national qualifications framework, via expanded access and open learning systems and via a programmes-based definition of the curriculum. The latter implies a shift away from disciplinary degrees to inter- or trans-disciplinary programmes which are planned to meet students' needs for employment and national needs for reconstruction and development. The idea of a programmes-based curriculum has since been overlaid with the adoption of outcomes-based education as the methodology for curriculum and programme design. The South African Qualifications Act established a statutory body tasked with overseeing the development and implementation of a framework on which all South African education and training qualifications are to be specified in an outcomes-based format, approved and registered. The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) is also responsible for monitoring and promoting the quality of education and training provision by accrediting providers to offer certain programmes and by registering assessors.

The stated purpose of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) is to:

"create an integrated national framework for learning achievements; facilitate access to, and mobility and progression within education, training and career paths; enhance the quality of education and training; accelerate the redress of past unfair discrimination in education, training and employment opportunities and thereby contribute to the full personal development of each learner and the social and economic development of the nation at large." ([SAQA Bulletin, May/ June, 1997:5](#))

Concerns about the New Policies

Nobody committed to building a new democratic South Africa and familiar with the notoriously fragmented, unjust, inefficient and irrelevant education system inherited from the apartheid era, would quibble with these goals. However, we do have some serious misgivings about the possibility of the NQF achieving these goals in the current South African context. Our misgivings are dealt with under four headings: an incredulity about the grand narrative on which the NQF is based, a concern about the appropriateness of

outcomes-based education for universities and the Humanities in particular, a concern that the new system runs counter to traditional academic culture and a concern that we may be operating from different and incompatible paradigms of curriculum. We deal with each in turn below.

The NQF's Grand Narrative

The purposes of the NQF, quoted above, are based on a grand narrative which assumes that education and training can be integrated, packaged and bought and sold in such a way that lifelong learners will leave the education and training system as highly employable, productive workers in possession of a range of desirable generic, transferable skills. The narrative continues — the skilling of the workforce in this way will contribute not only to personal development, but also to social redress, equity and the development of a national economy which is competitive in a global market. In the early 1990s, under the macro-economic policy of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), it was assumed that the new government could simultaneously grow the economy and redistribute social goods, and that the increased accessibility and relevance of an integrated education and training system would contribute to this massive social project. However, by the mid-1990s it had become clear that the RDP was unrealisable. The limitations of South Africa's very narrow tax base and pressures to open up the economy to the global market led to a shift to a neo-Liberal, monetarist, macro-economic policy (Growth, Employment and Redistribution, GEAR). One of the effects of this policy change is that, except for the very poor, the provision of social services by the state will diminish and these will increasingly become the responsibility of the individual. Furthermore, levels of productivity remain very low and unemployment is on the increase (currently estimated at between 30 and 40 %). In this context, the social effects of the NQF are likely to be greater inequality (see [Jansen, 1997](#); [Harley & Parker, 1998](#)). This is because, although the NQF may develop a more accessible and flexible education and training system, the cost of participating in that system will increasingly be borne by individuals and by the private sector. Those already in employment will be in a position to benefit from the NQF, whilst the mass of unemployed are unlikely to be affected. Furthermore those educational institutions with sound human and financial resources will be able to use the programmes and outcomes-based method of curriculum design and the NQF system to improve their offerings, whilst those without will fall further behind. Ironically, the effects of globalisation appear to be undermining the South African government's attempt to establish an education and training system which will enable it to participate competitively in a global economy.

The claim that the NQF system will contribute to national economic development may also be wishful thinking. There is not a shred of evidence in almost 80 years of curriculum change literature to suggest that altering the curriculum of schools leads to, or is associated with, changes in national economies ([Jansen, 1997:3](#)).

There is no empirically proven connection between economic performance and the levels of education in any given country. Education among the workforce of an enterprise is often irrelevant to on-the-job productivity and is sometimes counter-productive ([Gokulsing, Ainley & Tysome, 1996:9](#)).

Other studies suggest that it is only basic levels of literacy and numeracy that are one factor among many in the improvement of productivity. In most cases, the literature suggests, educational improvements follow rather than lead to improved economic performance.

The Appropriateness of OBE?

Our concern about the appropriateness of outcomes-based education (OBE) for universities and for the Humanities in particular has been dealt with elsewhere (see [Luckett & Luckett 1999](#)). Briefly, it is based on a concern that outcomes or competency-based education is premised on an out-dated behaviourist psychology which assumes a certain uniformity and predictability in human behaviour. The outcomes-based method of curriculum design epitomizes linear, instrumental reasoning in which micro-level action and behaviour (in the classroom) is meant to be determined by pre-specified learning outcomes and assessment criteria. In contrast, the Humanities aim to develop creativity, criticality and difference. OBE can lead to an atomised and additive view of knowledge which could undermine disciplinary knowledge structures if the units of learning become too small. It also tends to ignore the teaching and learning context. This in turn can undervalue the professional role of the teacher and the active role of learners in curriculum implementation and assessment. Allied to these concerns are concerns that the NQF could lead to a collapsing of the boundaries between different forms of knowledge and that it could be based on wrong assumptions about the transferability of learning (which cannot be stripped from its sites and contexts of acquisition, see [Lave, J. & Wegner, E. 1991](#)).

Traditional Academic Culture

The imposition of the SAQA-NQF system is likely to be viewed as threatening in South African universities for the following reasons. Universities have traditionally been closed institutions, with strong internal rationales and cultures. The culture of the academy is typically highly individualised, lecturer and discipline-centered, and based on a liberal-humanist discourse in which individuals are viewed as self-actualising and self-liberating through the power of human reason. The idea that higher education should be pursued for extrinsic rather than intrinsic ends is likely to be unpalatable to most academics who are driven by the logic of the need to research and reproduce their disciplines rather than by functional ends outside of the academy. Knowledge in universities is commonly understood as decontextualised, propositional and hierarchically pre-classified and structured by the academic disciplines. Thus the requirement that academics should consult with business, employers and other stakeholders about what and how to teach is threatening to the traditional, discipline-based *raison d'être* (excluding of course those involved in professional development). Traditionally, pedagogy in universities has been implicit, the goals and intentions of lecturers have had to be inferred by 'bright' students (those with the appropriate cultural capital). The demands of articulating an explicit pedagogy, such as OBE, are foreign to most academics. This is linked to the notion of accountability. In South Africa, academics have historically not had to account for their educational practice (traditionally it has been their research practices that have been monitored and rewarded.). The little monitoring of educational practice that has occurred has been done fairly informally and unsystematically via peer review, for example via the external examining system. It has been assumed that as experts in their disciplines, academics know what is best for their students and they have never before been asked to be accountable for what they do in their classrooms.

Different Paradigms of Curriculum

It is significant that there is no agreed understanding of the meaning of curriculum (and therefore of educational practice) in the educational literature. Following [Grundy \(1987\)](#) and [Kemmis \(1995\)](#), who apply Habermas' theory of knowledge-constitutive interests to

education, three different educational paradigms can be identified, based on different understandings and uses of knowledge.

The technical paradigm develops knowledge to control nature. It generates instrumental knowledge usually in the form of causal explanation, e.g. the empirical-analytical sciences. Within this paradigm, curriculum knowledge is often viewed as a body of knowledge 'out there' to be reproduced in the classroom. This means that the curriculum tends to be understood as a product, as teaching inputs or as learning outcomes. The curriculum is often understood as a plan or a document which serves to prescribe educational practice, understood as individual behaviour or sometimes as system-structured social behaviour. Within this paradigm the purpose of education tends to be viewed instrumentally as the equipping of learners with the knowledge and skills required for the workplace and the education system is judged in terms of its efficiency and effectiveness in doing so. [Goodson \(1994\)](#) has criticised this understanding of 'curriculum as prescription' because it allows a division of labour between curriculum designers and curriculum implementers, i.e. it allows control of the curriculum to be placed in the hands of central governments or educational bureaucracies which denies teacher and pupil agency in the daily educational process. (This is revisited under the discussion on lifeworlds below).

The practical or hermeneutic paradigm of curriculum develops knowledge to understand human social action. Knowledge is used to build mutual understanding and wise action within a framework of values. Education in this paradigm is not vocationally directed, but rather considered to be intrinsically worthwhile for the individuals involved. The curriculum is understood as practice, which is based on the teacher-learner interaction — the teacher's professional judgment and the learner's understanding. If there are learning outcomes, these serve only as a guide to be re-interpreted contextually by both teachers and learners. It is the process of the curriculum which is the focus, i.e. what actions will provide opportunities for learning. Educational practice is thus understood as individual intentional action, which is socially shaped by values, discourses, cultures and tradition.

The critical paradigm extends the hermeneutic paradigm to include critical reflection on the social and historical shaping of our ideas, actions and institutions (ideology critique) with a view to emancipating ourselves from past irrationality and injustice. In this paradigm, education is understood to transform not only the individual (as in the hermeneutic) but also to result in social action for the improvement or transformation of society. The curriculum is understood as praxis, an integration of critical reflection and social action; and curriculum knowledge is understood to be socially constructed and politically interested. Educational practice is viewed dialectically as socially and discursively constituted by both human agency and social structure.

This brief overview of different ways of understanding curriculum helps to explain why tensions and conflicts arise if some groupings, such as those in training institutions, labour, business and the natural and applied sciences, for example, operate from within the technical paradigm, whilst others, such as academics in the human and social sciences, may practice predominantly from within the hermeneutic paradigm and others, such as some of the policy-makers involved in the establishment of SAQA, operate from within the critical paradigm, whilst others still may operate from hybrid paradigms. Different assumptions about the nature of knowledge, the curriculum and the purpose of education can lead to conflicting understandings about how to develop and implement an NQF.

For the purposes of the argument developed in this paper, I would like to suggest that we understand university education as occurring from within various hybrids of the technical and hermeneutic paradigms, with the hermeneutic paradigm dominating in the human and social sciences and the technical paradigm dominating in the natural and applied sciences. We also suggest that the practice of OBE is perfectly compatible with the technical paradigm because it is here that learning is assumed to be predictable, observable and measurable. One of the issues which we will explore later in this paper is the extent to which OBE can be practised from within the hermeneutic paradigm.

An Opinion Survey

Given our four concerns outlined above, we decided to investigate the effects of the imposition of the SAQA-NQF system and the shift to outcomes-based programmes on the Humanities in South African universities. We chose the Humanities because these are the disciplines which are, or which are perceived to be, most threatened by the new system. The Humanities are not vocational disciplines and the link between these disciplines, work and 'national development' has traditionally been very tenuous. Secondly, due to abysmally poor school leaving results in Maths and Science, particularly from black schools, the Humanities remain the disciplines most highly subscribed to: in 1997 the percentage headcount enrollments for all state universities was 78% in the Human and Social Sciences as opposed to 22% in Science and Technology ([Department of Education, 1999: Appendix 2, Graph 5](#)). It is this imbalance in the size and shape of the system and the perceived irrelevance of the Humanities to the national development agenda which the state is anxious to correct. Furthermore, as suggested above, we assumed that academics in the Humanities are most likely to be operating from within a hermeneutic paradigm of curriculum and that they would not easily embrace the 'can do' performative epistemology which underpins outcomes-based education and the 'new vocationalism'.

To this end, we designed and administered a simple questionnaire for academic staff in one faculty of Human Sciences and for all Deans of Humanities in the country to elicit their opinions on the extent to which they believe the current policy changes in HET will result in improvements in the quality of the education they offer (see [Appendix](#) for a copy of the questionnaire). Eighteen (18) Deans and 21 academics responded. The responses from both groups were so similar that we have treated them as one set of responses for reporting purposes. The responses were collated, summarised and presented to the Deans for further discussion in a follow-up workshop. Key points made in these discussions are also included in the summaries below.

We have organised the responses into the following four themes:

- 1) the relationship between the Humanities and employment,
- 2) the personal responses of academic staff to the demands of re-organising their curricula into outcomes-based programmes and qualifications to be registered on the NQF,
- 3) the extent to which the respondents believe that the shift to an outcomes-based curriculum will result in improvements in the quality of teaching and learning,
- 4) the relationship between the traditional Humanities disciplines and the new inter-disciplinary programmes and forms of knowledge production.

Under each theme, the summarised responses are divided into positive and negative groupings. Within these groupings, the responses are clustered according to topic (indicated by a bullet point). The responses are reported verbatim (indicated by italics).

1) The relationship between the Humanities and employment

Positive:

- *We need to be aware of the worsening economic situation of our students and the importance of and ethical responsibility to train them for employment; most students have an instrumental view of education in any case*
- *We need to build the concept of lifelong learning into the curriculum, e.g. exit points, flexibility, offer short courses and certificates; (but the subsidy situation for such courses needs clarification)*
- *The Humanities can develop the following general transferable skill in its graduates - criticality, knowledge retrieval, knowledge command, knowledge production, awareness of social context, cultural and aesthetic understanding, awareness of the effects of representation, logical reasoning and debate, creativity, lateral thinking, imagination, responsibility, integrity, sense of justice, respect for others, self-confidence, self-management, self-critique.*
- *The Humanities can greatly enhance employability by offering "in-service" training at postgraduate level*
- *Named programmes (e.g. B.A. [Communication & Media Studies]) do attract more students, they appear to be more closely linked to employability, but is this just a perception or reality?; We need to check the packages we offer with employers, in a language they understand*

Negative:

- *We need to educate employers to recognise importance of Humanities ways of thinking for effective employment; We shouldn't interpret market needs too narrowly, the market is fickle and constantly changing; We should also educate for self-employment, e.g. Humanities & IT - and also for leisure and for life; Do we know what the market will want in the future? Our programmes need to be responsive, adaptable and flexible*
- *We need to produce graduates with practical skills, but still within a UNIVERSITY ethos and knowledge base; we need to keep a balance between marketable skills & knowledge depth & theoretical underpinnings; Too narrow a vocational focus at undergraduate level could prove to be career-limiting rather than career-enhancing; We should develop complex practices rather than simple skills; We should focus on contextualisation rather than vocationalisation; It's a matter of short-term gain (marketable skills, employability) v. long-term loss (graduates who can think critically and generate knowledge).*
- *Why should we have to justify enriching the quality of a life?; We must hold onto the value of formative education*
- *If we want to produce hard skills then need to integrate more with the world of work; We shouldn't try to compete with Technikons, we shouldn't collapse the boundaries between the Universities and Technikons, rather we should ensure that they are complementary and that articulation can occur between them*

2) The responses of academic staff:

Positive

- *It is a good opportunity for curriculum review; I found thinking i.t.o. outcomes useful; It will make HE more accountable, relevant & flexible; For the first time we have been forced to work in programme teams, this creates synergy between the disciplines; We discovered repetition and redundancy in our modules, some can now be used for more than one programme*

Negative:

- *We were confused & irritated by SAQA-speak and skeptical about its implementability; I think it's a "bureaucratic farce"; I'm not convinced of the need to monumentalise the curriculum in this way; We are academics not educationists, why do we have to adopt all this educational mumbo-jumbo? This has been a very time-consuming exercise, bureaucratic demands should not take time & energy away from teaching.*

3) The extent to which respondents believe that the shift to an outcomes-based curriculum will result in improvements in the quality of teaching and learning.

Positive:

- *Students & their needs are made the focus of the curriculum; It will result in a more learner-centered as opposed to teacher-centered approach, leading to less passive students and more autonomous learners*
- *Outcomes-based programme design has helped us to focus and clarify our visions and to be more explicit about what we teach; Outcomes-based modules helpful for constructing programmes.*
- *Link between learning outcomes, teaching methods and assessment must be made, and these linked to evaluation mechanism; It requires new teaching strategies and assessment methods, old assessment methods do not necessarily test even our traditional outcomes; It should make assessment more transparent, accurate and fair; Integrated assessment means more than the traditional disciplinary exam, is this a strict requirement on the part of SAQA?*
- *The shift to OBE has resulted in a new need for staff development*

Negative:

- *Who are we writing outcomes for? SAQA, peers or students? Are we writing them for the top students or for average students? This is a moral issue - for we need to be sure to assess the outcomes we describe; We need to write broad outcomes that capture more than the attainment of skills; We must hold on to qualitative measures of learning achievement, learning outcomes should also include values; Can University learning be reduced to learning outcomes?*
- *OBE could result in fragmentation of knowledge and the disciplines; loss of depth of content, loss of general formative education, loss of the apprenticeship model of education; We must resist unit standards; Greater accountability and transparency in HE could become crass reductionism; Even the SAQA critical outcomes are unlikely to*

be achieved via a narrow outcomes-based approach; We must at all costs avoid unit standards

- 4) The relationship between traditional Humanities disciplines and new inter-disciplinary programmes and forms of knowledge production

Positive:

- *We need to ensure that we are integrating our research as well as our teaching programmes*
- *Current research is based on Mode 2 knowledge production, or "conceptual engineering" in which discipline experts are called together to solve particular problems, we educate for this*
- *Regionalisation may be one way to save our dying disciplines.*

Negative:

- *Beware of the disciplines (and the staff who teach them) losing their identities, this could remove their enthusiasm for what they teach; Traditional disciplines are under threat, we may lose our research base for future postgraduates; Disciplinary bases are still needed for inter-disciplinary research; Interdisciplinary programmes are undermining the discipline-specific research and expertise of our academics; We must keep the formative degree to preserve the disciplines; We are retaining discipline-based departments as the guardians of the disciplines; Criticality is a "good thing", but what are students to be critical of? They have to be initiated into a discipline and a body of knowledge before they can be critical about it.*

System and Lifeworld Perspectives

The data quoted above suggest a mixed response to the imposition of the SAQA-NQF system by Deans and academics in the Humanities and to some extent confirms our four concerns expressed at the beginning of the paper. The challenge is to implement policy in such a way that it does take into account the understandings, identities, cultures and values of those who inhabit the HET system; those who have to make the new policies happen. One way of making sense of the tensions between the demands of the SAQA-NQF system and the culture and values of those working in universities may be to adopt Habermas' concepts of 'system' and 'lifeworld'. Following Kemmis (1995), who applies Habermas' concepts of "system" and "lifeworld" to education, we can use these concepts to understand how tensions and conflicts develop between the two in such a way that curriculum and pedagogic processes are undermined and educational reform not realised. We can also use these two concepts to try to resolve the conflict. It is crucial to note that Habermas suggests that we should understand system and lifeworld not as binary opposites, but rather as interdependent and present in all real life settings. He claims that the tension between system and lifeworld is one of the key tensions of late modernity (Kemmis, 1995:5).

With respect to education, system can be understood to refer to the macro administrative and funding policies and structures which have the power to affect the conditions and organisation of educational work. According to Kemmis, "education is increasingly being functionally integrated into the imperatives of the economy and occupational system and to the political and legal administrative systems, under the influence of the steering media of

money and administrative power" (1998: 22). It is important to note that these central policies and structures are usually mediated by sub-systems, the meso-level internal structures and policies of specific institutions. So, using the macro SAQA-NQF system as an example, institutions of HET are currently interpreting and implementing the requirements for the interim registration of qualifications from the perspective of their institution's mission, goals and procedures and rules for the approval of degrees. People are integrated into a system, not as individuals, but in terms of roles which have specified functions, for example a Dean and a Programme Director and a lecturer all have different functions in curriculum development. Habermas proposes that systems function when we 'get on with the job', that is by using 'functional reason' for 'rational-purposive action'. This means that systems and sub-systems drive us to act in instrumental ways to achieve pre-specified outcomes or institutionally defined goals. This is precisely what the technology of outcomes-based education gets us to do. SAQA has the administrative power (which we are told will be backed by the Department of Education's funding power) to register or not register qualifications on the NQF in an outcomes-based format. This obliges us to pre-specify what we will teach, how we will assess, etc. At the meso-level, we are likely to be asked to put quality assurance procedures in place to assess the extent to which our students do in fact achieve these outcomes. Efficient systems must function instrumentally and they tend to develop a 'functional logic' and discourse of their own to enable them to do so. This is all part of 'getting on with the job'. But systems and their structures and processes tend to become reified (their social and historical construction gets lost) and this leads to a danger that the subjects within them (teachers and learners) tend to become invisible. However, at the micro-level of the classroom, the everyday practice of teachers and learners cannot and should not be fully accounted for in terms of the system's rules and procedures within which they are bound to act.

Habermas' complementary concept to 'system' is that of 'lifeworld'. This refers to the inter-subjective social action that individuals engage in, in order to interpret their social worlds for themselves and to relate to other individuals in the sub-system from within their own senses of identity. This social integration enables the building of shared understandings, cultures, traditions, norms, values, solidarity and personal identities within institutions. This perspective focuses on the social practices of language, work and power. Habermas suggests that the lifeworld perspective is based on 'critical reason' and is characterized by 'communicative action'.

Communicative action comes into play whenever we need to arrive at unforced consensus with others about how to understand ourselves and what to do in the practical circumstances we find ourselves (Kemmis, 1995:14).

This often involves interrupting the rational-purposive action that the system requires, to have conversations in which we question the purpose and nature of what we are doing, in relation to our ethics and values. Teacher-learner interaction, which is the key to the implementation of the curriculum, should, according to Kemmis (1995), be conducted primarily through communicative action and critical reason as opposed to functional reason. In other words, teacher-learner interaction best occurs within specific lifeworlds which need to be (re)produced in localised, educational contexts. Tensions arise when the functioning of the system and sub-systems start to over-ride the logic of what makes sense to individuals in their local contexts and the demands and constraints of the system begin to colonise peoples' lifeworlds.

If we return to the negative groupings of responses in the data above, one can see how many of the fears and concerns expressed by Deans and academics about the imposition of

the new system reflect this sense of colonisation and threatened lifeworlds. As emphasised above, this is particularly so for academics whose personal identities and vested interests are tied up with the promotion and reproduction of their disciplines. For example, with reference to the effects of the new system, there is recurrent use of phrases such as: undermine, threat, loss, and dying. Statements of personal identity are made, for example, We are academics not educationists; as are statements of institutional identity, We shouldn't collapse the boundaries between the Universities and the Technikons. There is also recurrent concern to preserve, retain and be guardians of the (Humanities) disciplines, the university ethos, the Humanities ways of thinking, summed up in this admonition, Beware of the disciplines and the staff who teach them losing their identities. Other comments refer to values, for example: Who are we writing outcomes for? ... this is a moral issue ... Why should we have to justify enriching the quality of a life? and Learning outcomes should also include values. Others expressed frustration with the dominance of functional reasoning, for example references to crass reductionism, a narrow outcomes-based approach.

One academic expressed this eloquently,

In English Studies, the structure that OBE tends to enforce on courses is positive but also limiting; it does not easily accommodate the marginal, the meandering, the side-street or the following of a thread. Interaction with the class becomes limited by the requirement of getting on with the programme and attaining its learning outcomes.

However, as stated above it is crucial to understand the relationship between a system and the lifeworlds of those within it as dialectical; one of mutual constitution.

The functioning of system is realised through lifeworld settings in which people must maintain structures of culture, society and personality (Kemmis, 1995: 14). It is unhelpful, therefore, to fall into the trap of 'them versus us' thinking in trying to negotiate a way forward between SAQA and the Humanities. Instead, Kemmis argues that the mutual constitution of system and lifeworld are conditional for successful educational reform. If the SAQA-NQF system is to be more than an elaborate machinery of prescription and surveillance, and if it is to lead to improved educational practice, then it will need to operate in such a way that it does not undermine the lifeworld processes necessary to sustain educational practice. It cannot afford to ignore teachers and learners as people with intentions and identities who need to make their working and learning lives meaningful from within the logic of their lifeworlds. Likewise, lecturers in HE will need to be prepared to conform to the macro-system requirements and try to make it work at the micro-level (this is reflected in the positive groupings of responses in the data above).

Negotiating a Way Forward

One way of managing the tension between the demands of the SAQA-NQF system and the need to preserve the lifeworlds of traditional academics is (again adapting Kemmis, 1995), to reconceptualise the curriculum process from the perspectives of both system and lifeworld. In this way we may be able to claim a space for critical reasoning and communicative action by HET practitioners and for the development of interpretive rather than instrumental intellects, despite the increased demands for instrumental rational-purposive action by the SAQA-NQF macro-system.

A common way of understanding curriculum is via an action-research cycle comprising four moments (see diagram below). If one takes these four moments of an action research cycle at the micro-level of the individual practitioner, one can suggest that the two forms of rationality and action (i.e. functional and critical) be allowed to dominate at different moments (not that either are ever totally absent).

For example, functional reasoning and rational-purposive action are likely to be dominant in the decision-making and planning moment (1), particularly as SAQA requires the OBE method of curriculum design which demands rational-purposive action in setting learning outcomes, in an attempt to specify, predict and control the learning process. The exercise of functional reasoning at this moment is essential if systemic coherence and articulation via common credit-ratings, levels, specifications, etc. is to be established and if the state is to use registration on the NQF as a form of minimal quality control. I am arguing for the term 'standard' to be used in the system only as an adjective and not as a noun. The standardisation of the specification of qualifications is long overdue in our education and training system, thus to have standard credit-ratings, standardised level descriptors, a standard format for the submission of qualifications, etc. will greatly improve the system. But the imposition of national standards (nouns) is likely to seriously undermine the academic lifeworld and will probably be rejected by universities for this reason.

However, despite the need for standardisation in the planning moment of the curriculum, the agency of HE practitioners in the design and assessment of qualifications should not be undermined or colonised by the SAQA-NQF system. In a high quality education system, design, teaching and assessment are closely linked and best carried out by the same people.

We believe that the requirements for registration of qualifications on the NQF, if carried out conscientiously by individual academics, are sufficient to result in enormous improvements to the quality of the curriculum. For example, the specification of learning outcomes for all programmes and the modules comprising them will enable both quality assurance and assessment processes to be more transparent and rigorous. But, having met these system requirements, I suggest that when it comes to implementing the curriculum plan in the classroom, in moment (2), critical reasoning should be allowed to dominate. Given that most academics working in the Humanities understand curriculum in terms of the hermeneutic paradigm, it seems appropriate that communicative action between lecturers and students should dominate the teaching-learning moment. This would mean that curriculum plans and specifications have a dialectic rather than prescriptive relationship to practice. For example the curriculum plan formulated in moment (1) would not be understood to be prescriptive in the classroom, the out-workings of the plan could be co-created by teachers and learners according to their interests and needs. In this way students would be encouraged to re-negotiate the meanings of the learning outcomes from within their specific contexts and lifeworlds and will be more likely to 'own' their learning and to develop a 'deep approach' as opposed to a 'surface approach' to learning. Through communicative action, lecturers could use their discretion and professional judgment to interpret (and modify) the learning outcomes and assessment criteria as they seek to make meaning within the inter-subjectivities of their classrooms. Within the hermeneutic paradigm, competence would be understood to mean more than performance, performance being the signifier from which competence (the signified) is inferred via subjective, but professional judgment.

This leads us to consider assessment. The SAQA-NQF system should not undermine the professional role of HET practitioners as assessors. Apart from the fact that it has been historically impossible to develop reliable, standardised, assessment systems, the SAQA-

NQF system is unlikely to develop the capacity to impose standardised assessment; nor would this be desirable. It is highly unlikely that learning in HET can be measured against nationally specified criteria. Within the hermeneutic paradigm, a constructivist view of learning and a socially constructed view of knowledge suggests that it is not possible to specify beforehand exactly what learners will learn. Learning is understood to be situated and context-dependent. This means that assessment should also take context into account, and only the teachers of particular learners can do this. This means that in terms of assessment policy, concerns for validity are prioritised over reliability and contextualised assessment practices are encouraged.

In the reflective-observation moment (3), critical reasoning and communicative action should again be allowed to dominate. Here an institutional space for reflection on practice could be provided for lecturers to self-evaluate and to make their own sense of their curriculum practice on the basis of data gathered — their own observations, student assessment results, student evaluations, etc. This could be then expressed in unthreatening institutional spaces at the meso-level, with colleagues so that reflection is shared, inter-subjective understandings about practice are built and the policies and plans of the macro-system questioned from the perspective of practice. It is important here to encourage the recovery of critical reasoning, so that practitioners are free to stand back and critique both system, sub-system and individual practice. A consequence of the shift to a programmes-based definition of HET is that programme teams could provide an ideal unit for the development of teaching confidence and competence via collaborative planning and critical reflection. For the first time, the system is requiring academics to work in teams. These could become the units where staff and curriculum development needs are identified and met, provided they have access to educational expertise.

In the conceptualising and evaluating moment (4), the insights of educational theory and critical social theory should be brought to bear on the practitioners' self-reflections. Practitioners should be given an opportunity to reformulate their understandings of curriculum and to reconstruct their curriculum practice on the basis of perspectives provided by social and educational theory. These could be fed in into participatory and more public fora at the meso-level. It is here that the results of quantitative research on educational practice should also be taken into account and that summative evaluation for decision-making for further planning could occur. In this fourth moment, one could return to a more functional way of reasoning to ensure that the new insights developed via critical reasoning are validated by educational theory, quantitative data and external review and also shaped into feasible, system-coherent plans for improvement. Decisions for improvement should, as far as possible, include those responsible for implementing them.

The quality assurance procedures that are negotiated between SAQA, the Higher Education Quality Committee and individual institutions should take into account both functional and critical reasoning. At the macro-system level, external auditing and should focus on auditing the quality assurance processes of the sub-systems and on ensuring that both critical and functional reasoning are applied, both qualitative and quantitative research methods used and that both system and lifeworld perspectives are taken into account. It is noteworthy that the SAQA-NQF macro-system intervenes primarily in moments one and four where functional rationality and rational purposive action are dominant. For the system to function effectively, it is vital that at the macro- and meso-levels, it is sufficiently flexible to respond to the creativity, insights and critique that will emerge through communicative action and critical reasoning primarily in moment three at the micro-level.

Conclusion

We have argued that the SAQA-NQF system will lose the support of HET practitioners and become dysfunctional if it fails to accommodate the lifeworld needs of its practitioners. Likewise, HET lecturers will need to acquire the new discourse of the system and comply with its requirements, particularly in the planning and evaluating moments of the curriculum action-research cycle. If this mutual accommodation were to be achieved, a hybrid educational discourse and practice could emerge which could save traditional academia from inward-looking irrelevance and from the limitations of the disciplines. Likewise, if the ideologues and bureaucrats of the SAQA-NQF system engaged in serious dialogue with academics (particularly those in the Humanities), they would be challenged to move beyond a performative epistemology and to understand the curriculum hermeneutically as opposed to technically. We believe that it is possible to develop an NQF from within the hermeneutic paradigm of curriculum, and further, that only if it is implemented in this way, will the NQF in fact deliver the learners that South African society so desperately needs.

For the challenges of development in late modernity are so complex and uncertain that it is interpretive, critical and self-reflexive 'lifelong learners', rather than instrumental, operational learners who are most likely to contribute to 'national reconstruction and development'. Prophets of late modernity such as [Ulrich Beck](#) (1992), argue that the certitudes of industrial society are over; its autonomised dynamism, technical and instrumental rationality, cannot solve the problems created by late modern capitalism and industrialisation. Beck (1992) suggests that the 'risk issues' are not issues of rationality, order and control; more of the same will destroy the foundations of the industrial order. Instead, 'reflexive modernisation' demands high levels of reflexivity at both at the personal and social levels and the following kinds of competence: self-reflexivity, self-confrontation, creativity, adaptability, team-work, systems-thinking and risk-taking. Clearly, these competences will not be developed through technological and functional reasoning; a form of criticality is required which goes beyond performance. But it is also unlikely that this can be developed by mastering the knowledge and discourse of one discipline alone. If anyone knows how to educate for Beck's 'competences' and for high levels of reflexivity and criticality, it is those familiar with 'the Humanities ways of thinking', operating from a wide knowledge base, with multiple discourses and in an interdisciplinary context! Those who teach the Humanities are probably our best bet.

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Appendix

Questionnaire for All Academic Staff in the Faculty of Human Sciences, UNP

Because I believe that it tends to impose a linear, product-based approach to curriculum design, I am running a small research project to investigate the extent to which an outcomes-based approach to curriculum design is (or isn't) compatible with Human and Social Science forms of knowledge. If you have survived completing the module and programme templates for your curriculum offerings, please complete and return to me by e-mail before Monday 10 May the questionnaire below.

Note: This exercise is entirely voluntary. I am circulating a similar questionnaire to all Deans of Humanities in S.A. I will undertake to circulate a short report and analysis of the findings to those of you who respond.

1. What has been your personal response to having to complete the modules (and programmes) templates?
2. How do you think an outcomes-based approach to curriculum design (which includes a greater emphasis on skills development and the employability of graduates) will change the form of education that your Faculty offers to students? What might be gained, what might be lost?
3. In what ways do you think the outcomes-based method of curriculum design might improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment practices in your programme?
(Please explain your answer)
4. In what ways do you think the outcomes-based method of curriculum design might undermine the quality of teaching, learning and assessment practices in your programme?
(Please explain your answer)
5. Do you think there is anything distinctive about the Humanities and Social Science knowledge forms, discourses and methods of knowledge production which make them particularly incompatible with an outcomes-based curriculum?
(Please explain your answer)
6. Any other comments:

Thank you for completing this questionnaire

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April, 1999