Certification or qualification

An analysis of formal and non-formal higher education in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The South African National Qualifications Framework is a comprehensive system which makes provision for the classification, registration, publication and articulation of quality-assured national qualifications. The purpose is to ensure an integrated national framework of learning achievements through the registration of qualifications and part qualifications by the South African Qualifications Authority. Furthermore, the* Skills Development Act*, 1998 (Act 97 of 1998) makes provision for the development of skills programmes which are occupationally based and credit-bearing. Many higher education institutions have opted to offer these educational opportunities to learners who would not have access or time to participate in formal qualifications programmes. These short learning programmes (SLPs) are usually created in response to a needs analysis and have a specific focus, such as leadership development or financial management.

The intent of the article is to contribute towards the current discussion whether SLPs are a viable and efficient mechanism to ensure capacity building within the South African public sector, with specific reference to local government.

INTRODUCTION

Lifelong and life-wide learning is considered to be non-negotiable characteristics of any organisation competing globally for skilled employees. Lifelong learning entails the improvement of knowledge, skills and competencies through a variety of formal, non-formal or informal learning opportunities accessed throughout your life. The purpose of lifelong learning is to ensure active citizenship, personal fulfilment, social inclusion and professional enhancement. Thus, integral to lifelong learning is the concept of non-formal learning. Life-wide learning acknowledges that all learning should be the product of life experience

combined with a pursuit of knowledge. Life-wide learning includes real contexts and authentic settings which are inherent characteristics of non-formal learning.

Non-formal learning is in many instances the only available channel through which working individuals can enhance their personal capacity. Census 2011 (2012:11) reports that only 12.1% of the South African population have completed some form of higher education qualification (whether fully or in part). The *National Plan for Higher Education*, 2001, requires 20% participation in higher education over the next 10–15 years. The reality is that not all have access or will be granted entry into formal higher education programmes. Nor can the current higher education infrastructure and capacity expand to include such figures over the next 10–15 years.

The article will conceptualise short learning programmes within the framework for formal and non-formal education. Specific attention is given to the role of higher education as well as the current composition and role of higher education in South Africa. The article described recognition of prior learning as an integral part to the success of non-formal education and highlights the benefits for both the organisation and the individual where recognition of non-formal education is given. International validation for non-formal education is discussed and the article concludes with specific observations regarding the question of certification or qualification.

CONCEPTUALISING SHORT LEARNING PROGRAMMES

Before embarking on a definition of a SLP, the broader policy environment supporting education and training should be examined. The *White Paper on Education and Training*, 1995, makes provision for an integrated approach to training and education which aims to erode the boundaries between education and training, between academic and everyday knowledge and between different forms of knowledge, disciplines or subjects (Ensor 2003:325–326). The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) was established to embody these erosions and offer greater access and equity to education and training. What has, perhaps, had the greatest influence is the notion of credit accumulation and transfer which could offer learners access to formal programmes through an informal route, *i.e.* accreditation of informal programmes on a specific NQF level allowing for access into formal higher education degrees. The NQF would function as a mechanism through which (*South African Qualifications Act*, 1995 (Act 58 of 1995) Section 2):

- existing competence is certified;
- certification can count to further qualifications;
- qualifications can be matched against others to allow for progression through a career; and
- qualifications can be accumulated over a period of time.

But as Walters (2010) argues: "NQFs are best understood as works-in-progress and as contestable artefacts of modern society, which can contribute in a modest way to how a society manages the relations amongst education, training, work and development by finding 'common ground' between distinct forms of learning and articulation with work and development practices. They are useful vehicles for communication, cooperation and

coordination across education, training, work and development". The basic building block for achieving the above is known as the unit standard. Unit standards are developed to represent a unit of learning associated with notional hours of learning, credits earned for learning demonstrated and certification when competence is demonstrated. A prominent distinction between formal and non-formal types of education is that a formal programme will constitute at least 120 credits on a specific NQF level, while non-formal SLPs do not produce more than 119 credits in a single programme on a specific NQF level. There is no specific requirement that states that the offering of SLPs should translate into credits, which produces a challenge for higher education in recognising the learning taken place through a non-formal SLP route.

Unit standards are not descriptive in its method of delivery and thus make provision for multiple forms of curriculum delivery, including SLPs. While unit standards are usually associated with trades and occupational sectors, the credits associated with unit standards should have an influence when recognition for learning is given in a formal context. Since unit standards are not connected to a specific form of delivery or institution, it can be benchmarked nationally, which makes provision for the transfer of credits between learning institutions, including higher education institutions. All the above was facilitated through the implementation of the *South African Qualifications Authority Act*, 1995 (Act 58 of 1995) which enables the creation of standard generating bodies that operate separately from learning institutions or service providers. Mention should be made that the *National Qualifications Framework Act*, 2008 (Act 67 of 2008) makes provision for SAQA to register qualifications and part qualifications on the NQF. However, Ensor (2003:336–338) argues that removing higher education institutions from the construction of unit standards leads to multiple challenges, including *inter alia*:

- the notion of generic transferable skills across disciplinary boundaries leads to fragmented education provision;
- the right of higher education institutions to set standards, design curricula and assess quality is undermined; and
- the notion that different knowledge forms (education and training) are commensurable and can be placed in relation with each other through generic competencies and outcomes ignores the distinctive natures of education and training.

Within the above framework SLPs are enabled as mechanisms through which non-formal education can be achieved. The concepts of non-formal learning and education are, however, contested concepts. Education, whether basic or further, is defined as when the teacher has the authority to require people to gain knowledge of a curriculum taken from a pre-established body of knowledge. Knowledge is thus organised and formal, whereas learning can be non-formal or informal. However, Eraut (2000:12) argues for classifying learning into formal and non-formal categories stating that formal learning takes place according to a prescribed learning framework, is an organised learning event, takes place in the presence of a designated teacher or trainer, leads to the awarding of a qualification or credit and entails the external specification of outcomes. Thus, any learning which takes place outside these features would be considered non-formal learning. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development defines non-formal learning as learning which takes place through a structured programme of instruction but does not lead to the attainment of a formal qualification (Smith & Clayton 2009:8).

However, Livingstone (2001:2) argues that within the context of adult learning, non-formal education or further education entails voluntary learning with the assistance of a teacher facilitating an organised curriculum. Thus, all learning is assumed to be individual, rather than social which implies that where the learning is voluntary, it is considered to be more non-formal.

Carron and Carr-Hill (1991:5–6) argue that determining the boundaries of non-formal education can be done according to the degree of formalisation of the learning process, or by the degrees of integration between education and its environment, or by the degree of flexibility in client participation. However, all three categories could be combined in a single educational opportunity. Thus, the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) categorises learning into courses, programmes and fields of education, where courses comprise planned learning experiences in a particular subject or skills set, a programme combines courses chosen from a syllabus and a field of education relates to the same broad subject matter area. Furthermore, education comprises regular and adult education where adult education includes formal and non-formal education. Non-formal adult education then takes place for the purpose of personal development or professional skills training.

SLPs are generally developed to address the latter, namely professional skills training (also known as continuous professional development training). Specific characteristics of SLPs include a particular trade or occupation focus, favouring modularisation and credit accumulation and transfer rather than whole qualifications and emphasising the development of generic competencies. The NQF requires specific critical cross field outcomes to be associated with all SLPs, which include problem solving, creativity, working in teams, self development and management, decision-making and working in a cross-cultural context (DPLG n.d.). SAQA (2004:11–12) describes SLPs as including short courses and skills programmes where credits are awarded or not. Skills programmes are then occupationally-based programmes which will constitute credits towards a qualification which is registered on the NQF. Short courses can be either credit-bearing or not, but do not constitute a full qualification (less than 120 credits) although part qualifications can be registered on the NQF. Thus, the basic difference between a qualification and a SLP is the following (SAQA 2004:16):

- a qualification must contain fundamental, core and elective learning; and
- a SLP focuses on a particular part of a qualification, but will not lead to the achievement of the full qualification.

The delivery of SLPs, therefore, implies that a learner will receive formal accreditation through certification for non-formal learning against a specific part of a qualification. Thus, the SLP could be used as a vehicle through which non-formal learning leads to in-part accreditation of a formal qualification. The dual purpose of the SLP is then to achieve credits towards unit standards or qualifications, while ensuring personal development and professional growth.

The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) (2008:7–8) argues that the recognition of non-formal learning should be done since it improves access to and efficiency in the formal education sector, it provides access to learning opportunities for those previously excluded from education and training opportunities and it is considered to be a good practice since organisations accept that not all learning takes place in a formal context. Using Colley, Hodkinson and Malcolm's (2002:14-15) criteria for distinguishing between formal and non-formal education, the following table provides an analysis of SLPs.

Table 1 Analysis of formal and non-formal education according to distinguishing criteria

Distinguishing criteria	Formal qualifications	Non-formal SLPs
Teacher-learner relations	Teacher as authority	Facilitator and learning is shared
Location	Educational premises	Non-educational premises – emphasis on conducive learning environment
Learner/teacher intentionality/ activity	Teacher control	Shared control
Extent of planning or intentional structuring	Planned and structured	Organic and evolving
External determination or not	Summative assessment/ accreditation Externally determined objectives/ outcomes	For certification, formative and summative assessment Internally determined objectives
Purposes and interest to meet needs of dominant or marginalised groups	Open to all groups, according to published criteria	Open to targeted groups and sponsored
The nature of knowledge	Propositional knowledge	Practical and process knowledge
The status of the knowledge and learning	High status	Low status – doing more important
Education or non-education	Formal	Non-formal
Whether outcomes can be measured	Measured outcomes	If assessed, outcomes measured
Whether learning is collective/ collaborative or individual	Individual learning	Communal/collaborative learning
The purposes of learning	Learning to preserve the status quo	Learning for change and empowerment
Pedagogical approaches	Pedagogy of transmission and control	Learner-centred, negotiated pedagogy
The mediation of learning – by whom and how	Learning mediated through agents of authority	Learning mediated through learner democracy
The time-frames of learning	Fixed and limited time-frame	Open-ended engagement
The extent to which learning is tacit or explicit	Learning is the main explicit purpose	Learning is either of secondary significance or is implicit
The extent to which learning is context-specific of generalisable/transferable	Learning is applicable in a range of contexts	Learning is context-specific

Taking the above into consideration, identifying the most important criteria remains problematic. Subsequently, Colley *et al.* (2002:17) grouped the criteria into four clusters, namely:

- process, which includes learner activity, pedagogical style and issues of assessment;
- location and setting, which places learning either for the purpose of education or workplace enhancement;
- purposes, which discusses whether learning it the purpose in itself or of secondary importance; and
- content, which covers what is being learned.

The reality is that education is only classified as formal or non-formal by those accrediting the learning. Should learning be considered within the clusters given above, then the distinctions of formal, non-formal or informal become obsolete. Learning through SLPs combine a variety of characteristics normally associated with formal learning, yet is considered non-formal within the context of higher education.

Against the above, the stark reality is reported through the *Green Paper on Post-School Training and Education*, 2012, which states that in 2007 2,8 million people between the ages of 18 and 25 years were not employed, not enrolled in any form of education or training and were not severely disabled. The subsequent worldwide economic slump has led to an increase in these figures. Furthermore, there is little integration between different learning delivery sites such as universities, Further Education and Training (FET) colleges, adult learning centres and organisations focusing on youth development. This implies that learning which takes place at a specific place cannot be transferred to another and this is particularly evident in the non-formal education sector, which includes SLPs. The obvious challenge here-in is that when learners embark on SLPs with the intent to further their formal education, they are prohibited from doing so since institutions do not recognise each other's learning outcomes even when outcomes as prescribed by unit standards which are supposed to be nationally transferable. Higher education qualifications are provider based qualifications and although the quality of the qualification is nationally assured, it does not mean that the qualification is necessarily a national qualification. This adds to the challenge of credit accumulation and transfer.

The *Green Paper on Post-School Training and Education*, 2012, argues that the inadequacy in terms of quantity, quality and diversity in universities hamper the provision of post-school education and training. The *Green Paper* makes the further argument that vocational education cannot be a dead-end, but that learners should be given entry into university education through a more non-formal route.

A further argument can be made that the contention surrounding the definition and status of non-formal learning hampers the use of it. Non-formal SLPs could be an effective manner to increase access and address the critical skills shortages experienced in the South African public sector. However, should higher education institutions not recognise the status of non-formal learning as a vehicle for accessing or gaining entry into formal qualifications, then non-formal programmes will be used by higher education institutions to generate additional income and serve no further educational purpose, even though in the development of the non-formal programme adherence is paid to quality assurance processes.

With the above in mind, the article offers a brief explanation of the current higher education landscape in South Africa.

THE SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION LANDSCAPE

Since 1994 a restructuring of higher education in South Africa was implemented. The aim of the restructuring was to ensure increased access through transformed curricula, structure and epistemology to those previously disadvantaged by the apartheid education system. Specific emphasis was also placed on creating a more focused and efficient higher education system (Higher Education in Context 2012). Currently, South Africa has 23 public universities divided into:

- 11 traditional research-focused universities offering mainly Bachelor and postgraduate degrees;
- 6 comprehensive universities offering a combination of traditional university type programmes (from Bachelors to Doctoral degrees) as well as technology-focused qualifications ; and
- 6 universities of technology which are vocationally oriented institutions awarding higher certificates, diplomas and degrees although some also offer postgraduate degrees.

The higher education environment comprises a complex relationship between various role-players, including the Department of Higher Education and Training, the South African Qualifications Authority, the Council on Higher Education and its quality committee and the various higher education institutions and further education and training colleges. The South African Qualifications Authority was created to advise the Minister of Higher Education and Training on issues regarding post school education and training. A specific goal of the *National Plan for Higher Education*, 2001, was to ensure that access is given to those previously disadvantaged and IEASA (2012) argues that the change in student composition has been nothing less than astounding. Student numbers have doubled over the past 16 years from 473 000 in 1993 to 799 658 in 2008. Where students were predominantly white in 1993, African participation has grown to 61% by 2005. However, while around 60% of white children age 18 enter university, only around 7% of African children gain entry. The primary reason remains the low quality of primary and secondary schooling, especially in rural areas. However, the target population for the delivery of SLPs are not the 18 year old school leaving children, but rather adults who have working experience and who acknowledge the need for self-development.

Within the above understanding of the target market for SLPs the traditional role of universities is now tested. Higher education's traditional responsibility of education, being the provision of learning, has changed to a role of learning. Learning incorporates all education, but it also includes knowledge, skills and attitudes acquired beyond the education system and is often far less planned. Jarvis (2001:37–38) states that learning is the "process of constructing and transforming experience into knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs and the senses". In this dynamic world, the experiences through which adults learn change all the time and universities recognise their responsibility towards incorporating this type of learning, although it still seems to want to formalise it into curricular service- or experiential learning activities.

Barnett (2004:62) argues that the concept of higher education is changing with remarkable rapidity. Whereas higher education was seemed to be elite, it is now for the masses due to globalisation, the revolution brought about by technology (open access

and virtual universities), agendas of participation, access and equal opportunities and the marketisation of higher education, to name but a few. The question should be asked what the responsibility of the university is.

Barnett (2004:65–66) quoting Readings (1996), Lyotard (1984), Derrida (1992), Habermas (1990) and Baumann (2000) contests that the reality of higher education is as follows:

- Universities are moving towards exhibiting 'performativity' in its epistemologies, moving towards using its leverage in society by addressing its responsibility towards society (although what its responsibility is remains open to interpretation).
- Universities no longer stand for a specific set of ideas (such as traditionally was seen to be the ideas of truth, knowledge, reason and communication) or to have a particular purpose.

Traditionalists bemoan the loss of standards and the loss of purity, while those who deem themselves more radical call for universities to be responsive to society, accountable and efficient. While higher education faces challenges of funding, access and equity, the reality remains that the university should incorporate the character of its society, and where that society emphasises skills and innovation above pure knowledge, the university should seek to find its place and purpose therein. Reverda (2000:20) argues that if opportunities arise for qualifications to be accessed through both formal and non-formal means, then universities will need to become flexible in their admission policies as well as their curriculum content and delivery. He states that "pre-determined and rather static standards and regulations do not meet the needs and demands of a network society anymore" (p. 20).

Gallacher and Feutrie (2003:72) argue that the nature of work in the current knowledge-based society has fundamentally changed. There is a marked shift away from material production to information processing and from standardised to more flexible specialised production processes as being characteristic of what Gee *et al.* (1996) termed the *knowledge economy*. Higher education has the responsibility to ensure that individuals are capable of engaging and re-engaging with learning at various stages in their careers. The issue of relevance is paramount to curriculum content and different forms of knowledge should be recognised and reflected in higher education curricula.

Taking the above into consideration, it is important to discuss what the character of the current South African society, with its particular emphasis on capacity building, looks like.

CURRENT STATUS OF CAPACITY IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT SECTOR

The United Nations Development Plan (UNDP) defines capacity as the ability of individuals, organisations and societies to solve problems, perform functions and reach objectives in a sustainable manner. The three inter-related core elements of capacity are:

- Individual capacity which refers to the potential of employees to perform the job they are employed in. However, the *Revised National Capacity Building Framework for Local Government: 2012–2016* (2012:4–5) identify the lack of qualifications, experience and competence as hampering the capacity of local government to perform its functions. Specific emphasis is placed on building capacity of councillors

through forms of education (including SLPs), training, development and creating networks of professional people.

- Institutional capacity refers to the operational competence found in municipalities. This competence is evident in the employees of the municipality, its physical resources, budget, intellectual resources, organisational structure and policy instruments. The emphasis is on ensuring appropriate service delivery through the effective and efficient use of resources in a developmental and sustainable manner. However, when resources are not implemented and used to complement each other, public sector competence becomes non-existent.
- Environmental capacity which relates to the competence found outside organisational structures and include socio-economic factors, demographics, natural and mineral resources as well as awareness of population regarding their rights, their power to voice their concerns and hold government accountable. Should government be incapable of harnessing its environmental capacity, then service delivery protest which debilitate local government functioning will be an every-day occurrence.

Taking the above into consideration, local government is further tasked with specific developmental goals which imply that assumptions regarding the competence of individuals, the effectiveness of organisational arrangements, the efficiency of policy instruments and the conduciveness of socio-political environment can be made. The *Revised National Capacity Building Framework for Local Government: 2012–2016* (2012:5) describes the interdependent and complementary nature of these assumptions and states that an individual will only change as a result of the improvement in knowledge or skills if it can be sustained through use in the organisation.

Another factor which necessitates government to continue to place an emphasis on capacity building is the attempt at creating a professional management cadre for public sector organisations through National Treasury's Competency Frameworks for middle and senior managers as well as the Senior Management Service Competencies developed by the Department of Public Service and Administration. Ntliziywana (2010:5-6) argues that the election of competent councillors is not high on government's reform agenda, even though they play a vital part in ensuring responsible government and service delivery. Furthermore, he asks the question whether the time has arrived for municipalities to elect only those competent to discharge their function, specifically when taking into account requests for better service delivery. These realities are placed in direct relation to the ability of public servants and officials to access non-formal education and training programmes which could assist them in delivering better quality services. Some international examples of recognition provided for non-formal education will now be discussed.

INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION FOR NON-FORMAL EDUCATION

A popular story is told which hails from Silicon Valley located in California, USA, where experts in the field of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) contribute to America's economic growth through their high standard innovations in the area of software

programmes. Silicon Valley employs persons from all across the globe and they do not ask for proof of qualification. They rather require extensive curriculum vitae to be written which implies that "one finds a broad and varied mixture of self-taught men and women and experts with a Harvard University degree in ICT, as well as every combination in between" (Reverda 2000:19). Thus, employment is based on competence and not qualification, which emphasises the recognition given to non-formal education through SLPs aimed at professional development.

Literature refers to both the validation and recognition of non-formal learning. Validation implies the verification and assessment of the standard obtained through non-formal means of education and learning, while recognition is a value judgement made about the outcome observed from non-formal education. For the purpose of the article the emphasis is placed on producing a judgement that equates the value of non-formal education as on par with formal education. Recognition for prior learning refers to the assessment of any prior learning, regardless of the manner in which it was obtained – whether formal or non-formal or informal learning. The OECD (n.d:6) defines it as "a process, which uses a variety of tolls to help learners reflect on, identify, articulate and demonstrate past learning. This learning has been acquired through study, work and other life experiences and is not recognised through formal transfer of credit mechanisms". Thus, the recognition of prior learning or assessment of prior learning evaluates past learning against standards in order to award credits which could lead to formal qualifications.

The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) (2008:10) points out that European countries' national motives for recognising non-formal learning is stimulated by European policies emanating from the European Commission and resolutions taken by the European Union in which the value of learning (including formal and non-formal) is the key to making lifelong and life-wide learning a practical reality. The European Council adopted principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning in May 2004 (Council of the European Union, 2004). The principles include the following:

- validation is voluntary;
- the privacy of individuals are respected;
- equal access and fair treatment are guaranteed;
- stakeholders should establish systems for validation;
- systems should contain mechanisms for guidance and counselling of individuals;
- the process, procedures and criteria for validation must be fair, transparent and underpinned by quality assurance; and
- the professional competences of those who carry out assessments must be assured.

The purpose of the above is to develop, together with European Guidelines (adopted in 2008) and a European inventory, a strategy to support the systematic exchange of experience and mutual learning taking place with regard to formal and non-formal validation in member states. The European inventory differentiates between (Colardyn & Bjornavold 2004:71):

- Formal learning which occurs within an organised and structured content (including short courses) and leads to formal recognition. Formal learning is learner focused.
- Non-formal learning comprising embedded learning in planned activities not designed specifically for learning purposes. Non-formal learning takes the learner's point of view into consideration.

- Informal learning which occurs because of daily life experiences and are experiential and sometimes accidental.

The purpose of the European inventory is to ensure that, whether formal or non-formal, education is recognised by member states, which means greater mobility and opportunities for learners, but also greater access to capacity for member states. This implies that all member states have developed systems which allows for the validation of formal and non-formal education. Permanent systems already exist in Finland and the United Kingdom through its Accreditation of Prior Learning embedded in the national education and training system. Some European examples of formal standards that exist include Austria and Germany (through profiles for formal education and training), Belgium (through ISO/IEC 17024 which is an international standard regarding the certification of competence), Ireland (through its NQF), Netherlands (through the independent standards setting organisation *Centraal organ van de Landelijke Opleidingsorganen van het Bedrijfsleven*) and France (through standards formulated by *Répertoire Opérationnel des Métiers et des Emplois*) (Colardyn & Bjornavold 2004:72).

The phases of validation include identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal learning. While in some cases the recognition could lead to formal qualification, in others the validation of learning is a goal in itself and formal certification is not required. In these cases validation is equated with competency assessments for placement or promotion (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP), 2008:10). However, for the purpose of the article, emphasis is on validation or recognition for the purpose of certification, which in turn addresses the professional development needs of the individual while also ensuring that capacity within the organisation receives attention.

The observation can be made that countries which share an outcomes-based philosophy to education also develop and implement national qualifications frameworks which aim to provide paths for recognition and accreditation. In Canada central sector specific bodies or councils have been established to ensure that the recognition of prior learning leads to increased professional and organisational capacity. According to Dyson and Keating (2005:43) recognition of prior learning is an umbrella term which comprises qualification recognition, credit recognition, prior learning assessment and the assessment of experiential learning. 39% of the Canadian population participate in post secondary education, but the government has set a target of 50% over the next decade and argues that the recognition of prior learning will be an important strategy in meeting the set target. Specific focus is placed on providing recognition for skills development, which is usually equated with non-formal education opportunities, such as SLPs. One specific challenge for Canada is that since education is a provincial and territorial function (10 provinces and 3 territories), no national system for the recognition of prior learning exists which implies that opportunities for recognition are limited.

Since the 1971 Carnegie Commission Report the United States of America has placed "greater value ... on non-institutional learning" (Dyson & Keating 2005:51). However, recognition is given in the form of college credits (higher education credits) rather than vocational certificates. Thus, credits are obtained for occupational purposes which are recognised by employers as valid, while allowing the learner to obtain partial recognition towards a formal qualification. No national recognition for prior learning policy exists,

but the practice of offering university credits against non-formal learning is an established practice (Dyson & Keating 2005:51–54).

Australia has probably one of the more developed systems of recognition in place. The Australian National Training Authority (2001:9) describes the system as providing the following: "... recognition of competencies held, regardless of how, when or where learning has occurred." The Australian National Training Authority (2001:9) further stipulates that the Australian Quality Training Framework makes provision for competencies to be acquired through any combination of formal and non-formal or informal education, training, work experience and general life experience. Sector specific profiles describe the competencies against assessment and recognition will take place. As is the case with specific European countries, Australia also perceives the recognition of prior learning as a means of self discovery which does not always lead to formal qualification, but will increase organisational capacity, since individuals are given the opportunity to understand the extent of their competence and will take on their jobs with confidence and direction (Dyson & Keating 2005:6–8).

Although in most of the examples cited above, specific councils or bodies were created to ensure recognition, the South African situation may be different. The need to increase higher education access and participation allows for higher education institutions to significantly contribute to this through the recognition for non-formal learning. Higher education institutions are already involved in delivering non-formal learning programmes or SLPs and opportunity exist to ensure proper alignment through the recognition of prior learning and offer accreditation towards obtaining a formal qualification. The benefits for both organisations and individual are considerable and will be discussed in the next section.

BENEFITS OF RECOGNITION

Smith and Clayton (2009:12–13) argue that the benefits achieved by recognising non-formal or informal learning, are important enough for the higher education sector to consider recognising non-formal learning for the purpose of gaining access to formal learning opportunities. Some benefits include – from a policy perspective, that lifelong learning is considered to enhance economic prosperity and aid in building a stable social society. Recognition assists in avoiding unnecessary training or duplication of training, while encouraging upskilling and improving knowledge. Non-formal learning offers opportunities for improved employment outcome and offers an accelerated progression path through learning programme, which saves money and time for individuals, their employers and their organisations.

The argument remains, that the recognition of non-formal learning is a critical mechanism for ensuring access to training pathways where skills shortages are a major concern for governments and the broader economy. Furthermore, policy makers should recognise that the recognition of non-formal learning is an important way towards achieving social inclusion. Gallacher and Feutrie (2003:72) argue that concerns regarding social inclusion will only be exacerbated should proper recognition not be given to non-formal education. The learning divide created between knowledge rich (obtained through formal qualifications) and knowledge poor (obtained through unrecognised, non-formal and informal learning) will become more significant should only the limited few in possession of formal qualifications be given the opportunity for full participation in society.

The above argued for the benefits that could be achieved from a policy perspective, but there are also benefits to the individual, as identified by Smith and Clayton (2009:12-13):

- through recognition the lives of individual learners are transformed by building their confidence and self-esteem;
- learners understand the importance of personal skills and knowledge within their work contexts;
- learners obtain extrinsic benefits such as enhanced employment opportunities, formal validation and certification of prior learning, improved access to formal qualifications, reduction of time in gaining a qualification;
- learners obtain intrinsic benefits such as recognising their own skills gaps and higher motivation to continue with their formal education.

Taking the above into consideration, appropriate attention should be given to making recognition work. Specific barriers to recognition include a lack of recognition awareness among learners and the devaluing of their own learning and experiences by learners. Universities should also guard against making the recognition of prior learning such a cumbersome and bureaucratic process that deters rather than encourages learners to participate. Smith and Clayton (2009:13–14) state that learners would rather not participate in the recognition or assessment of their prior learning, because of the complexity of the process. Learners often lack the language to describe (reflect on) their previous experiences in such a way as would meet the standards of academic discourse. The paradox seems to be that learners are expected to reflect on the manner in which their non-formal learning has met the standards of formal learning, which implies a high level of understanding of what happens in the formal qualification. Research suggests that learners would feel more comfortable participating in a formal course, than reflecting on their own experience gained through informal and non-formal learning. The reality is that learners place no value on their personal learning if it is not also externally valued by means of obtaining a certificate, but preferably a qualification.

CONCLUSION

The debate regarding the provision of education and training through non-formal SLPs remains contentious. Added to the debate is the role of higher education as opposed to/or in collaboration with FET colleges and adult learning centres. The fact remains that the South African government carries enormous pressure for the delivery of quality services and, furthermore, quality service delivery is dependent on access to education and training. The reality is that those who perceive non-formal learning as a mechanism for achieving formal qualifications will want to start a new learning opportunity and will look at learning as a lifelong endeavour.

The recognition of non-formal learning will impact the lives of those disadvantaged groups within society. Social inclusion is a benefit which should be explored taking the requirements of the knowledge economy into consideration. The internationalisation of education and work and the need to harness human resource potential should be seen as a basis for all social inclusion policies which in turn should have a positive impact on access

and equity for specific targeted groups. However, for the above to work, both the labour and educational sectors of society should award non-formal learning the recognition it deserves. Only then will the NQF be able to operate as a comprehensive and integrated seamless educational framework.

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