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Education service delivery: the disastrous case of outcomes-based qualifications frameworks

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Abstract: International trends towards outcomes-based qualifications frameworks as the drivers of educational reform fit in well with trends in service delivery and public sector reform. Education reform in South Africa provides a particularly interesting case study of this phenomenon, because of the very comprehensive outcomes-based national qualifications framework that was implemented shortly after the transition to democracy. Problems with the framework as a basis for education reform became rapidly apparent, and the system is now deadlocked in a series of unresolved policy reviews. A key to understanding this collapse is the role of knowledge in relation to education. The outcomes-based qualification framework approach turns out to have very little to do with education, and in fact to have the potential to increase educational inequalities, particularly in poor countries.

Key words: Outcomes-based education, national qualifications framework, qualification-driven reform, South Africa, education service delivery.

I Introduction

A central feature of managerial reform in the public sector is the disaggregation of government agencies into smaller units that are constituted as central cost centres and expected to compete with one another or with private institutions contracted by the state in similar arrangements. Key to this approach is the notion of performance statements and measurement of performance in order to ensure customer satisfaction. Managerialism emphasises performance specification as the basis for a 'results orientation', in order to achieve 'efficiency and effectiveness' (Pollit, 1998). This paper argues that the growing popularity of outcomes-based qualification frameworks in education reform can be accounted for at least partly in the light of these trends in public-sector reform. Outcomes-based qualifications and qualifications frameworks claim to be able to provide a basis for the measurement of private provision as well as the regulation and control of public provision. They claim to be able to do this through providing explicit, formal and measurable standards against which all education must be measured. These standards are captured in the form of outcome statements, which learners must be able to

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meet. The qualifications themselves become the tools for driving the education system.

South Africa provides a particularly clear case study of the problems with outcomes-based qualifications frameworks. The first major education policy reform of the African National Congress (ANC) government was a national qualifications framework composed of outcomes-based qualifications. Ten years later, the qualifications framework is deadlocked in unresolved policy reviews and educational inequalities remain stark (Chisholm, 2004; Fleish, 2006).

At the time of the transition to democracy in 1994, South Africa was a country of great inequality in search of an approach to education reform that could entirely overhaul the apartheid education system. Because it discovered outcomes-based qualifications at this moment of democratic transition and because the idea of outcomes-based qualifications entered policy-reform circles largely through the labour movement in South Africa, this approach was embraced as a democratic and progressive one. This association between outcomes-based qualifications and democratisation enabled South Africa to develop a highly comprehensive outcomes-based qualification framework.

However, South Africa's transition was actually a dual one. At the same time as the transition to democracy, South Africa re-entered the global economy and a rapid liberalisation of the economy was overseen by the democratically elected government (Allais, 2003). Although the outcomes-based qualifications framework was perceived as part of the transition to democracy, it was just as embedded in a transition to neo-liberalism as has been the case with outcomes-based frameworks elsewhere in the world (Phillips, 1998).

A broad body of literature exists (for example, Paine, 1999; Dibben, Roper and Wood, 2004) which discusses the problems of managerialism. Whilst this provides some insight into the nature of the problem, it does not sufficiently explain the extent of the problem for education. Instead, I draw on a body of literature that examines educational knowledge to explain why education cannot be treated as an easily specifiable 'good' which can be 'delivered', whether through the market or through a corporatised state. I argue that this approach to measuring and controlling education misunderstands its nature and its purpose. I conclude that viewing education as something that can be 'delivered' against performance statements, as through outcomes-based qualifications frameworks, seems in fact to undermine the provision of education, particularly in poor countries and marginalised communities.

II Outcomes-based qualifications and public-sector reform under neo-liberalism

Outcomes-based education and national qualifications frameworks are separate but related ideas in education reform. Some countries, such as Australia, have national qualifications stretching across the whole education system, but do not have a corresponding outcomes-based approach in all parts of the education system (Keating, 2003). Others experimented with outcomes-based education without national qualifications frameworks, such as in teacher education in the United States (Spreen, 2001). However, these two approaches often go together. There is a growing interest internationally in the idea of a national framework of qualifications based on outcomes defined according to a common set of criteria and including all kinds of qualifications at all levels (Young, 2003a). In South Africa, in particular, the two ideas have been strongly intertwined. I used the phrase 'outcomes-based qualifications frameworks' to capture this.

The notion of qualifications frameworks emerged from relatively humble beginnings in vocational qualification reform in England, and has become a rapidly growing phenomenon in education reform internationally, albeit

largely in the English-speaking world (Young, 2005). In recent years, national qualifications frameworks seem to be popping up all over, in very different countries with very different contexts and levels of development, including New Zealand, Australia, Scotland, some countries in the Middle East, Mexico, the Pacific Islands, the West Indies, Namibia and Mauritius (Young, 2005).

The idea has also been picked up by a number of major international organisations, such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, the International Labour Organization, and the Commonwealth Secretariat. Donor funding to developing countries has increasingly been channelled into this kind of educational reform. The National Qualifications Framework in South Africa, for example, has been largely funded by the European Union, as well as receiving some funds from the Canadian government. The Dutch government's funding arm has recently funded a process exploring a regional qualifications framework in the Southern African Development Community (South African Qualifications Authority [SAQA], 2003; Chisholm, 2005).

The popularity of this approach over the past 20-odd years, since the vocational qualifications framework was first established in the United Kingdom, has resonated with the increasing dominance of neo-liberal ideas globally. Neo-liberalism, sometimes referred to as the 'Washington consensus', emphasises market solutions, essentially arguing that the market is the most efficient means of delivering goods and services and that the state should be 'pared down' and 'hollowed out' (Dibben *et al.*, 2004: 1). This has had a range of implications for education policy. I will just focus on three here, which have particular relevance for outcomes-based qualifications frameworks.

1 Education as the solution to economic problems

Internationally, there has been increasing government focus on education policy reforms. As governments are increasingly unwilling (or unable) to intervene in the economy, education is presented as the solution to unemployment. But if education is to be the solution to economic problems, it is thought that education must be *relevant* to the needs of the economy, not driven by what are perceived as the concerns and interests of the academy. An emphasis on education for 'human capital' and 'human resource development' has come to drive educational discourse. The dominant market-oriented orthodoxy has given rise to 'new perspectives on the purposes of education and (often implicit) definitions of what education is' (Spreen, 2001: 54).

This partly accounts for the rise of outcomes-based qualification frameworks, which claim to provide world-class standards against which students must perform and which are linked to employment, economic improvement and international competitiveness. Redesigning curricula on competency-based lines has been seen as necessary in order to promote flexible specialisation, which is seen as the route to a highly skilled, mobile workforce, and therefore to international competitiveness (Foley, 1994: 124). In this paradigm, learners are under a continual obligation to increase and change their level of skills in order to respond to shifts in the world labour market.

Qualifications frameworks have become popular in this context. National qualifications frameworks are seen as a way of raising the status of vocational qualifications – by showing that they are at the same level on a framework as other qualifications and thus establishing that they should be seen as equal by society. This seems useful to governments which want to lure reluctant populations away from general education programmes and into more vocational ones – which, according to the governments' logic, will be more relevant, will produce useful skills and will therefore develop the economy (Allais, 2006).

2 The need for accountability mechanisms

Second, because of the paring down of the state under neo-liberalism, there is pressure on the state both to increase the role of the market

in education and to increase accountability measures where the state *does* provide. The double bind on states is that on the one hand neo-liberalism says the state must be smaller and do less, and on the other hand states must ensure that taxpayers' money is well spent. Measuring performance through outcome statements has appeared to provide a solution to this, which accounts for the duality of managerialism and neo-liberalism. Thus, in a context in which the priorities of the public sector have 'shifted towards an emphasis on value-for-money, "flexibility" and "efficiency"' (Dibben *et al.*, 2004: 2), outcomes-based qualifications appear to offer the competence statements against which education can be delivered, assessed and evaluated, and against which cost recovery can be implemented.

3 Creating new markets

Third, the state is under pressure to increase the supply of high-quality, relevant-to-the-economy education without increasing the size of the state. Revisions in neo-liberal ideology have focused on market imperfections, moving from the notion that the world would function as a perfect market if only governments would stop interfering to the notion that the world will always be an imperfect market but that the role of governments is to make it a better market. A post-Washington consensus emerged, which 'is based on the need to acknowledge and address market imperfections' (Fine, 2001a: 4). In other words, the role of government is to support existing markets and build markets in areas that were previously seen as non-market (Fine, 2001b).

In this context, the role of governments as setters of performance targets against which service delivery can be measured is emphasised even more. Any contractor, or indeed any government-owned agency, is obliged to perform against the prescribed performance targets. Under this approach, whether an agency is private or state-owned becomes less important, as all have to function in the same way. The important trends are shifts from a stress on process to a stress on output, and emphasis on more competitive ways of providing public services through the disaggregation of state institutions. Explicit, formal, measurable standards and measures of performance and success are seen as essential to manage this.

Outcomes-based qualifications can be seen as a significant tool to open up markets in education. Private provision of education through fee-charging, privately owned schools, colleges and universities is of course an old phenomenon, and should not be confused with the recent trends. The outcomes-based qualification approach seems to allow far deeper market penetration into education, by creating separate educational competences as *goods* or *services* that can be delivered through the market. Stipulation of educational outcomes is seen to provide the potential to disaggregate the provision of education, so that providers can provide just the required outcome and consumers can purchase only the bits that they want without having to sit through long educational programmes which are perceived as irrelevant.

The idea is instead of education being dominated by the concerns of educators and the academy, education can be opened up to a wider range of service providers, who can all provide programmes that lead to the outcomes or competences in question. The primary role of the state is to regulate this market through contracted or government-owned agents. This regulation is different from earlier notions of regulating markets. Here, instead of the state protecting society from the failures of the market, the state is trying to increase the ways in which the market can deliver services to society, using regulation to *create* the market, to turn education into market-deliverable goods or service.

The outcomes-based qualifications approach emphasises that the most important aspect of education is the outcome or competence produced – the educational programme is not important. It then goes

further and argues that the outcome provides a standard against which any learner can be assessed, regardless of whether they have, in fact, been on an educational programme or not. Prior learning can be recognised against outcome statements. This type of approach provides a conceptual basis for a de-emphasis of educational institutions (expensive things for a state to maintain), as they do not have the basis to claim precedence over any other place in which a learner could have learnt an outcome. This is thought to be necessary to facilitate the creation of a more competitive market for the provision and purchase of educational services.

Further, providers, including state-owned ones, can be held accountable as their programmes can be measured against the outcome statements. So even if the purchaser is the taxpayer, in terms of the education provision that is still actually delivered by the state (as opposed to that which is merely regulated and monitored by the state), the accountability mechanism is the same. Educational institutions, as separate cost centres, must deliver competences in students according to the specified 'standards'. Whether they are buying from a private provider or from a state provider, the citizen is a consumer of market goods. Thus, the focus in educational reform is on setting the learning outcomes to be specified in the qualifications. It is believed that the rest will follow from the learning outcomes (Allais, 2006). The emphasis, in terms of the state, is to lead and drive a process of setting learning outcomes and not necessarily to build or develop educational institutions.

In short, internationally – and particularly in countries where neo-liberal ideas have been influential – governments have increasingly looked for educational reforms which on the one hand increase the supply of relevantly trained, competent potential workers or self-employed individuals ('human resources') and on the other hand claim to increase the measurability of education and the accountability of those employed or contracted by the state to deliver education. Outcomes-based qualification frameworks resonate with both the Washington consensus and the post-Washington consensus versions of neo-liberalism. Other, perhaps unrelated, trends such as the massification of education, whereby in the developed world the vast majority of age cohorts complete senior secondary education and far larger numbers proceed to tertiary education have also brought about increased government concern with regulating qualifications.

Specifying learning outcomes in qualifications not only fits in with public-sector reform, but it also has a broad, apparent commonsense appeal, as it appears to offer: a clear sense to learners of what is expected of them; a clear idea for society of what has been learnt; clear outcomes that educators can design programmes against; the eradication of the difference between high and low status qualifications or education programmes; and the creation of relevant and high-quality programmes. It is not a hard reform approach to sell to the general public, as its logic is highly seductive.

III The national qualifications framework in South Africa

1 Origins of the framework in South Africa

The concerns which led qualification frameworks and outcomes-based education to be seen as important internationally were magnified in South Africa because of the extreme inequality and astonishing inefficiency of the apartheid education system, the need for very rapid massification of senior secondary education and the rapid liberalisation of the South African economy after its sudden re-entry into the global economy (Desaubin, 2002; Allais, 2003, 2006).

But support for the national qualifications framework and outcomes-based education in South Africa also derived from the anti-apartheid movement and, in particular, the labour movement in South Africa. Education

was for a long time a major source of discontent in apartheid South Africa and was often a rallying point in the broader struggle against it (Allais, 2003). The labour movement established a policy development process involving a considerable amount of policy borrowing, particularly from the competence-based education movement in vocational education in Australia and New Zealand (Allais, 2003). Ideas about the role of outcomes and qualification frameworks in driving educational reform and delivery, which the unions brought from their engagement with counterparts in these countries, were further elaborated in consultative discussions involving business and the apartheid state (Allais, 2003). The policies also found fertile ground in a liberation movement that included a strong critique of the apartheid education system but did not have strong alternative proposals, particularly around curriculum (Muller, 2000). Thus, the idea of outcomes-based education and a national qualifications framework became the policy of the ANC government.

I have suggested that the roots of outcomes-based qualifications and qualifications frameworks might lie in state responses to neo-liberalism. However, the idea of 'social constructionism' has also been influential within educational reform. Social constructionism argues that knowledge simply reflects the interests of power groups. This is closely allied to a post-Modern notion of knowledge, in which no knowledge can claim precedence over another. In its strongest form, this notion argues that the difference between different types of knowledge is based on social perception, through which elites maintain their status by perpetuating certain abstract disciplines as important.

The appeal of this approach was particularly strong to those in the liberation movement who were trying to create new education policies, as well as to those who were trying to cling to their old curricula. While there had been intense struggles against Bantu education, the liberation movement wanted something more than just arguing for increasing access to education. The apartheid education system had been a system that was not only designed to exclude a large section of the population from higher levels of formal education, but had also been designed around highly ideological principles (referred to as Christian National Education) with a direct political project in mind. Thus, what was needed was not just a project to increase provision of and access to education, but also to change the nature of that education.

Social constructionism *seemed* to provide a useful way of critiquing apartheid education. This kind of standpoint emphasises how the socially disadvantaged can have insights unavailable to those in power because of their experience and position in society (Moore, 2004: 155), and also that no one form of knowledge should take precedence over another. It should also be pointed out that those who had designed or implemented Christian National Education did not want to be at the receiving end of another group's ideological priorities or interpretations of history.

The spirit of negotiation, reconciliation and tolerance which characterised the South African transition perhaps gave further credence to this way of thinking and to an approach which, although it rejected the official orthodoxy of the apartheid state, claimed to not want to create another official orthodoxy (Allais, 2006). The idea that knowledge and truth are relative and that school knowledge has no basis for superiority over any other kind of knowledge thus fell on fertile ground. It also seemed to explain the lived experiences that were denied by the apartheid education system. People knew, for example, that history as they learnt it in school could not be correct, because in history textbooks they learnt about 'peaceful separate co-existence' and about how all the different 'national groups' in South Africa were happily pursuing their own development within the confines of their own cultural ideas and preferences.

2 Outcomes to the rescue

The idea of outcomes-based qualifications was seen as a useful mechanism in this relativist universe, where disciplines could not be seen as necessarily the basis for a curriculum, but merely the knowledge forms which particular elites used to maintain their social pre-eminence. Instead of prescribing disciplines to be studied, it was thought that important socially agreed outcomes could be prescribed. The prescription of outcomes was thought not to replicate power structures, but in fact to contest them, because the outcomes would be prescribed by stakeholder groupings. In other words, everyone would have a say in the outcomes of educational processes, instead of only the experts in a particular field prescribing what should be learnt in it. The knowledge to be learnt would thus become unimportant, an input. The outcomes would be transferable across different contexts. Different educational institutions could choose their own content or knowledge, as long as it enabled learners to acquire the outcomes specified. This seemed like a welcome alternative to the highly authoritarian and prescriptive curriculum approach of the apartheid government.

It was thought that outcomes-based qualifications would be the basis for democratisation of education. Stakeholders would all input into the creation of the outcome statements that qualifications were composed of. Because any provider would be able to offer learning programmes against the outcome statements, access to education would be increased and education programmes would not be offered only by institutions which were tainted by their role under apartheid. The outcome statements would improve quality, as all educational provision would have to meet their requirements, thus ensuring that all learners were given education of an equal quality.

The social constructionist approach also seemed to provide a way of validating the knowledge of people who had been deprived of formal education, a way for them to describe their knowledge outside of a deficit model in relation to the formal knowledge that they lacked. The idea was that the outcome statements could be used as a basis for the recognition of learning that had not taken place in formal educational programmes – an issue of great concern in the liberation movement and in particular the trade unions. In addition, because industry would be involved in setting the outcomes, educational programmes would be relevant and useful to the economy.

3 Democratisation and liberalisation

In fact, the debates that happened about education policies in the labour movement were in a sense located just as much in the liberalisation of the economy as in the democratisation of the political system. Many in the labour movement, like many in the Left internationally, had bought into the idea that it was the low level of skills in South Africa that was the barrier to achieving a strategic edge in the global economy and had emphasised the need for a highly skilled labour force to achieve flexible specialization (Von Holdt, 1991a; Samson, 1999; Allais, 2003). While described in militant language, the unions were actually involved in a limited project focused on making the South African economy competitive in the international capitalist economy and on bringing the benefits of more jobs and a greater spread of wealth, higher wages and increased skills (Von Holdt, 1991b).

Thus, the outcomes-based national qualifications framework in South Africa can be seen as part of a global trend in public-sector reform which derived from the transition from a highly regulated and relatively isolated economy to a neo-liberal or open-market economy (Desaubin, 2002). As education reforms, it was primarily associated with the egalitarian concerns of the liberation movement in South Africa (Allais, 2003).

4 A comprehensive and all-encompassing framework

The idea of an outcomes-based qualifications framework resonated with different groupings across the political spectrum of South Africa

(Allais, 2003). Because of the very broad support for this particular policy approach and because it came to represent a coming together of different groupings, South Africa was able to develop a much more comprehensive and all-encompassing national qualifications framework than most other countries which have gone this route.

South Africa therefore developed a national qualifications framework that aimed to reform the entire system of education and training through the creation of outcomes-based qualifications that would populate the framework (Allais, 2006). The qualifications are composed of statements of 'learning outcomes' or 'competencies' which do not involve reference to specific inputs or programmes and which are defined independently of the route that learners take to become qualified. All levels of education, from primary to doctoral studies, and all types of education, from general academic programmes to highly specific, focused workplace training programmes, were to be accounted for in terms of these outcomes-based qualifications and in terms of unit standards, which were smaller parts of qualifications created around specific learning outcomes or competence statements.

For example, a National Certificate: Food and Beverage Manufacturing Technology: Cottage Cheese Technologist was created at senior secondary level. The qualification is composed of 23 unit standards, each specifying 'competences' that the learner must acquire. Examples of two of these unit standards are:

1. Coagulate a dairy mixture for the manufacturing of a fermented dairy product.
2. Demonstrate knowledge of the functional components of milk. (www.saqa.org.za Accessed on 12 November 2006)

In theory, these unit standards could be taught and assessed separately, so that learners could obtain the two 'competences' at their own pace from different providers. These qualifications were then to be pegged at different levels on the eight-level framework, thereby sending a message to society about the relative value of different qualifications. Educational providers would provide education against these standards or measurable output statements. The education thus provided, it was thought, would not only be democratic but relevant, as committees of stakeholders would have designed the outcome statements for each different field. At the same time, an outcomes-based approach to curriculum was introduced into primary schooling, whereby a list of 66 outcomes was given to teachers, who were supposed to supply their own content across eight different learning areas, based on the learning outcomes and the interests and contexts of the children they were teaching (Spreen, 2001).

5 Policy collapse

The ambitions for this policy intervention, as well as the breadth of its scope, were matched by the speed at which it became apparent that it could not deliver. The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) was brought legally into existence in 1995 (RSA, 1995) and got going in earnest in late 1997, after senior staff appointments had been made (SAQA, 1997, 1998). A review was tabled by the government in 2001 — after a very short time period indeed, signalling government awareness that the approach seemed not to be working (RSA, 2001). In 2002 and 2003, two different government teams tabled proposals to make substantial changes to the national qualifications framework. Neither set of proposals had been accepted as policy by mid-2006, causing a hiatus in the whole system. On the one hand, there has been awareness that it will be changed substantially, but on the other, there has been no clarity about the nature of the changes to be made.

In terms of the actual provision of education and training in South Africa, the qualifications framework cannot be seen as having played any substantial role. The initial version of

outcomes-based education which was introduced into the school curriculum was revised and a new curriculum with more prescribed content has been introduced (Chisholm, 2004). Universities have in general not done much more than redesigning the way in which their qualification documentation is presented – reading as descriptions of outcomes. It is certainly the case that course structures have changed and that there is more modularisation than there was in the past, but this was a trend before the NQF was introduced and is not necessarily linked to it. The point, though, is that the new qualifications that have been created and registered on the framework did not result in a rush of educational programmes designed against them. Colleges have started to attempt to design a few new programmes against the new qualifications, but have mainly offered old qualifications against syllabuses prescribed by the Department of Education.

The framework is, however, still being built – qualifications and unit standards continue to be developed and registered. At the time of writing, 9823 unit standards had been registered (www.saqa.org.za) and over 696 new qualifications had been registered by 2005 (SAQA, 2005). Hardly any of these qualifications have yet been awarded or studied. In other words, the qualifications framework is a castle in the clouds – a list of qualifications and unit standards in cyberspace, with not much relationship with the real world of educational provision. It is likely that the whole system will be overhauled (Departments of Education and Labour, 2003).

There is a range of reasons why the outcomes-based qualifications approach could have been unviable in South Africa – ranging from the inexperience or inefficiency of the institutions of the new state to the extreme and ambitious nature of the project. Notwithstanding the likely contribution of all of these, this paper argues that the core problem with outcomes-based qualifications frameworks is conceptual. There are general conceptual reasons why managerialist type reforms have encountered problems – the fantasy of being able to measure everything and the desire to micromanage professionals (Mintzberg, 1993). But in order to understand the extent of the problem of this approach in education, it is necessary to consider educational knowledge.

IV Education and knowledge

Three key problems are explored here (there are others). First, this system leads to a spiral of specification that becomes completely unworkable. Second, these over-specified outcome statements still do not provide a basis for curriculum design, because they ignore the nature of curriculum knowledge and do not specify knowledge. Finally, the nature of curriculum knowledge is such that it needs to be acquired in educational institutions.

1 The spiral of specification

In any education system or programme, there needs to be a basis for deciding what should be taught. The social constructionist position does not assist, because it says that no knowledge is better than any other knowledge, so there is nowhere to start. It is, in a sense, a non-theory of knowledge. The outcomes-based qualifications approach believes that outcomes provide a better basis for the selection of learning content and pedagogy than subjects or disciplines. This is based on the assumption that outcomes have a clear meaning independent of the context of a learning programme and that no area of knowledge has intrinsic value. The only value is in a skill or outcome which could, in principle, be obtained by studying something else.

But outcome statements or competence statements are, despite common perceptions and claims, not transparent. They always have to be interpreted and do not have a clear meaning on their own. The claims of the system, however, are based on the idea that outcome statements (in qualifications and unit standards) disclose meaning sufficiently to a wide enough range of people that performance can be measured against them. It is claimed

that learners can know what they are aiming at, employers can know exactly which competences qualification holders have, and so on. In other words, outcome statements need to be transparent if they are to be the clear, measurable standards against which performance will be measured.

This need for and lack of transparency leads to increasing elaboration of the standards as well as the development of increasingly narrow standards. The outcome in each unit standard is broken into specific outcomes, each of which has a list of assessment criteria and is located in a description of the contexts in which it can be applied. For example, a unit standard at level one of the qualifications framework entitled 'Maintain personal hygiene, health and presentation' is elaborated into four specific learning outcomes:

1. Wash hands effectively.
2. Practise good hygiene and grooming habits.
3. Deal with common health issues to prevent the spread of disease.
4. Strictly follow hygiene and health requirements in his/her dress code.

The first specific outcome, 'Wash hands effectively', alone has 15 assessment criteria against which hand washing must be measured. A spiral of specification ensues, resulting in 10- to 15-page long unit standards which are highly narrow, specified competences and qualifications specifications stretching across hundreds of pages for each qualification, also in narrow areas. This makes for a highly cumbersome and unmanageable system.

2 Educational knowledge

Despite the severity of the problem of overspecification, it is not necessarily specific only to education. The specification of any kinds of performances might lead to similar spirals of specification attempts. What makes it particularly problematic in education is that education is about the acquisition of knowledge and it is in relation to the specification of knowledge that the system really breaks down.

The outcomes-based qualifications framework approach is based on the idea of 'designing down', that is, designing learning programmes from the outcomes specified. This 'design down' idea assumes that knowledge can be selected on the basis of specified outcomes, because there is no significant reason why any piece of knowledge should be selected for an educational programme over another. In this approach, the content and pedagogy of a course are seen to *serve* outcomes – in other words, the content does not have intrinsic value. A segment of content selected from a discipline can be causally related to a specific learning outcome if it can contribute directly to the attainment of the outcome (Shalem et al. 2004). Knowledge is valuable only in so far as it enables or underpins the required outcomes.

The outcomes-based qualifications approach also argues that any given stipulated outcome can be obtained through formal, informal or non-formal learning. Outcomes can be defined separately from particular knowledge or occupational areas (Allais, 2006), and what makes them at a particular level is not a property of the knowledge area itself. In other words, an individual can be functioning at the same level of cognitive complexity, regardless of the types of knowledge being worked with (disciplinary and everyday knowledge). To put it in a different way, levels of cognitive complexity can be defined in the absence of a specified field of knowledge.

Level descriptors which describe each level of the qualifications framework are thus supposed to be able to describe cognitive functioning within any kind of knowledge area and so provide the basis for achieving parity, quality, relevance and redress. As long as any particular programme is designed down from these outcome statements and the outcome statements meet the requirements of the level descriptors, the programme will in an important sense be at the same cognitive level as another programme designed down in the

same way. Both will be testing the same level of competence in different areas and both will be testing the same generic competencies, such as problem solving. In addition, anyone at any point can be assessed against the same outcomes as those against which a programme is designed. If the individual meets the requirements, they can be said to have mastered the same competences. In this sense, outcomes-based qualifications frameworks are really assessment frameworks, because the emphasis is on the statements against which learners can be assessed, regardless of their learning path.

This is based on false epistemological assumptions. The flaw is in the believed relationship between level descriptors, outcome statements, knowledge and learning. Outcomes cannot provide the basis for designing learning programmes for disciplinary knowledge or craft knowledge, because these knowledge areas have their own structure, their own existence and they cannot be condensed into outcomes nor read out of the outcomes. Knowledge areas or disciplines 'take the form of a coherent, explicit and systematically principled structure' (Bernstein, 2000: 157; Moore 2004: 144). They can be hierarchically organised, as in the sciences, or organised as a series of specialized languages with 'specialized modes of interrogation and specialized criteria for the production and circulation of texts', as in the social sciences (Moore, 2004: 144). Studying subjects that have a theoretical and conceptual base (in other words, disciplines) enables or facilitates further study. Thus, knowledge is not all the same. There is a significant difference between knowledge that is organised into disciplines on the one hand and the knowledge available to people through everyday life experiences on the other. The former kind of knowledge has greater power of explanation and prediction through its ability to abstract from everyday situations.

Knowledge *is* social, in the sense that disciplines are the product of the collective social endeavour of specialists over time, but this does not mean that some knowledge cannot also be better than other knowledge (Moore, 2004: 149). It is possible to accept that things which are asserted as truths are fallible, conjectural and provisional, but also that some ways of evaluating truth claims are more reliable than others (Moore, 2004: 174). While the growth of knowledge has involved increasing specialisation and differentiation, which has been associated with social differentiation and stratification (Moore, 2004: 156), it is reductionist to equate the one with the other.

The growth of knowledge has a logic of its own, although one that is social in character. In other words, there are fundamentally different ways in which knowledge is socially produced, and some of the ways in which humans have gone about producing knowledge have proved more reliable than others. Academic subjects give understandings that are valuable in their own rights. Astronomy is more valuable to teach than astrology, even if astrology uses complex cognitive skills, because astronomy is giving us an understanding of the universe and that is valuable in its own right.

Because of the development of disciplines socially, over long periods of time, this type of knowledge is different to everyday knowledge and the conditions for its acquisition are different. Necessarily, curriculum or disciplinary knowledge is often not directly practically useful or easy to learn. The fact that disciplinary knowledge does not relate directly to everyday life is in fact a crucial part of how education works; curriculum knowledge *must* be discontinuous with everyday experience. A curriculum based on everyday experience cannot enable learners to move beyond that experience or to understand it in a broader perspective (Young, 2003b). Everyday knowledge is contextually bound and tied to practical concerns. It can be rich, nuanced and subtle, but it does not enable generalisation and explanation in the same way.

The purpose of education programmes is to provide learners with access to these kinds of knowledge, precisely because they do not acquire them in their everyday life. While it is

theoretically possible for someone to assimilate curriculum knowledge (or, to use Bernstein's terminology, 'vertical discourses') through informal processes, it is extremely unlikely that this will happen in the course of everyday life. The nature of disciplinary knowledge is such that learners need to be introduced into it in a sustained way, gradually acquiring greater levels of conceptual depth and breadth. It is because disciplinary areas are hierarchically structured that a long induction is essential. Mastery of extensive specifically chosen facts, concepts and principles is needed before progress can be made. Uninterrupted, extended, well-planned and structured schooling needs to be in place in order to enable such learning:

> The higher level needs a whole range of lower level parts to be in place before it can materialize. These just cannot be left out or easily jumped, as any learner well knows when missing out on a couple of mathematics classes. (Hugo, 2007, forthcoming: 286)

The argument here has simplified the very complex matter of curriculum design, which is even more complex in vocational or professional qualifications that do not only teach disciplines directly. There is no space here to explore the implications of these differences. The point simply is that knowledge organised in a curriculum cannot be derived from outcome statements, but has to be sourced and organised according to other principles, which are only available to experts within the knowledge domains.

3 Educational institutions

The nature of disciplinary knowledge, requiring sustained, carefully sequenced study, brings to the surface another major problem with the outcomes-based qualifications approach. A great deal of learning happens prior to, in between and after 'education', but education (in the sense of the mastery of bodies of knowledge or substantial areas of skill) happens in educational institutions. It cannot be provided easily, as good institutions take time and resources to build up. It cannot be disaggregated easily, as most learning needs to be sustained and systematic.

Learning works in formal education systems by providing sustained initiation into different areas of thought and knowledge or craft. Learners are socialised into a discipline, a field, a content area or a way of operating. In this process, much is learnt which is not formally assessed and which cannot be easily assessed, and often, the criteria for assessment cannot easily be articulated, except trivially 'to have mastered the ability to argue philosophically'. In Gamble's (2002: 79) words, 'evaluative criteria reside not only with the master, they reside *in* the master as the carrier of a collective knowledge tradition'. They cannot simply be written up into a standard or qualification.

Learning through the sustained process of a formal programme is far more than the sum total of assessment results – the assessment is often one of many components, as those who are increasingly emphasising compulsory attendance of classes at universities know. The assessment of evidence produced, such as examinations and pieces of writing, practical demonstrations or presentations of research or investigation findings measures only a few aspects of what is learnt, and not always the most important ones. A range of things which cannot be easily articulated or assessed are learnt and 'assessment' is understood as measuring a sample of what learners have learnt. This is understood in conjunction with the knowledge that learners have passed through a process in an institution in which society has (or might have) a degree of trust. Whether one believes that private provision of education is optimal for society or not, the point here is that education happens in institutions dedicated to this purpose and cannot be disaggregated and purchased or provided simply on the basis of lists of performance statements.

V Exaggerated effects in a developing country

Qualifications frameworks and outcomes-based qualifications which regulate the

delivery of educational services do not provide a basis for building an education system. Outcome-based education and qualifications frameworks seem to operate in a paradigm which emphasises delivery, but in the act of reducing knowledge and skills to things that can be delivered against performance statements, they undermine the possibility of education being delivered. Introducing such a system as the driver of educational reform can in fact make an education system worse, particularly in the context of developing countries with a weak or uneven system to start with. This type of approach reinforces inequalities in educational provision.

A position that argues against institutions and so-called elite knowledge provides states with a progressive-sounding justification for not building and developing such institutions for the poor. In other words, the approach looks as if it will drive an increase in educational delivery, but cannot because it does not provide a basis for the building and strengthening of educational institutions. The market cannot simply spring up and provide education. This is profoundly demonstrated by the total lack of provision of programmes against the nearly 10,000 unit standards that have been developed on the South African qualifications framework, and is a ridiculous waste of scarce resources in a country in which it is the provision of education that needs to be developed.

Scotland used its already strong educational institutions to align outcome statements derived from its curriculum documents to develop a qualifications framework (Keating, 2003). This is a vastly different enterprise from designing a framework of outcomes-based qualifications and hoping not only to overhaul an education system, but in fact to create new educational providers and programmes in response to the specified outcomes. Countries with weak educational systems and institutions are likely to be seduced by the rhetoric. But to allocate precious resources, time and energy at the expense of building institutions is likely to be disastrous. The role of organisations like the World Bank and the International Labour Organization in spreading this model should be viewed with great caution, and news that countries (such as Albania and Angola) devastated by civil war and with a desperate need for educational institutions are considering going down this route should probably be considered alarming.

The South African case study provides a vehicle to demonstrate that attempting to regulate the provision of education through outcome statements, which turn sets of competences into goods and services that can be delivered through the market, will not work because of the nature of education.

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