

# Lifelong learning in South Africa: dreams and delusions

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The new South Africa has formally embraced the concept of 'lifelong learning' in its education and training policies. But what is the concept of 'lifelong learning' that has informed these policies and what progress has there been in implementing them? Have these new policies brought significant changes to education and training for adults?

## Dreams in the dark

There have certainly been changes in South Africa since the early 1980s, when the idea of lifelong learning was a dream. It was not that it was impossible for pro-democracy adult educators to conceptualize or even to imagine what such a sublime educational process in an equally sublime enabling environment might be, but the painful realities of a people in the midst of a struggle to defeat the *apartheid* system postponed waking activities to more modest pursuits—running illegal literacy classes and night schools or engaging in debates with *apartheid* bureaucrats on whether a state proposal for 'non-formal education' was panacea or cheap ruse to modernize both *apartheid* and the black workforce.

However, even at the start of the 1980s, there were temptations to continue dreaming because everyday reality was clearly unstable and unsustainable. There were even policy engagements such as the Urban Foundation's study of non-formal education. The Urban Foundation think tank represented the interests of reformist big business, which wanted to explore policy directions towards which the *apartheid* government might be slowly shifted. The growing skills shortage in South Africa had prompted the non-formal education study that recommended recognition of the role of commerce and industry in education, including in decision making, and the integration of more technical and career education into formal schooling.<sup>1</sup>

Then, in February 1990, came the dramatic announcement of a political liberalization based on an agreement with the principal liberation movement, the African National Congress, and the setting up of the processes leading to new elections and a new constitution. A flurry of pre-election policy developments in every field ensued. For education, the most notable was the National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI), which represented the broad *anti-apartheid* constituency, though it

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was dominated by the African National Congress (ANC) and its allies, particularly the South African Congress of Trade Unions (COSATU).

### **Lifelong learning in the National Education Policy Investigation**

The National Education Policy Investigation's *Adult Education* report (1993) adopted a simple categorization of four main concepts of adult education, namely (radical and humanistic) adult education, non-formal education, continuing education and lifelong education. In its brief definition and description of lifelong education, it said (1993: 9):

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

It is also worth quoting the original text in the much longer draft report (Aitchison 1993: 16, 18):

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It is more communal and co-operative and less embedded in a schooling mode of thought. But it remains at present a visionary call for a learning society operating through a multiplicity of educational networks. The work of Ivan Illich on 'deschooling society' has informed much thought in this area.

*Lifelong education* is a dream in a land where so many have no education at all. But there are networks that form the basis for such a 'learning society'. The strength of South Africa's non-governmental organization sector will ensure that the dream will continue to be renewed. In the mundane present many lifelong education values are implicit (in different ways) in the conceptions of both adult and continuing education.

Clearly, these definitions owed much to the UNESCO propagated concepts from the early 1970s (see, for example, UNESCO 1972), which argued for a rejection of a 'front-end' model of education largely confined to children, youth and young adults and an advocacy of education as being available throughout life, as needed and

desired, for everyone. As Tight has argued more recently (1996: 36), three key features of such a conception of lifelong education are that it builds on and affects the all existing educational providers, extends beyond the formal educational providers to encompass all bodies and individuals involved in learning activities, and 'rests on the belief that individuals are, or can become, self-directing, and that they will see the value in engaging in lifelong education'.

However, the NEPI adult education group also recognized that no country had as yet achieved this full goal of a lifelong learning system as advocated by UNESCO. Hence, however desirable, it was this dreamlike aspect of lifelong education that led to it being discarded in favour of the more mundane conceptions of *adult education* and *continuing education* that were seen as more useful guides to the development of adult education policy options that would meet the competing calls for equity and development being made at that time.<sup>2</sup>

However, another of the NEPI reports had a very different take on the meaning of lifelong learning. In the *Adult Basic Education* report (National Education Policy Investigation 1992: 31–32), mention is made of Australia having 'a national standards framework and a 'competency-based' approach to education and training and adult literacy and basic education' and, after describing some of the features of this approach, noted that:

Attempts to expand the notion of competency, beyond its original restricted use, include:

- the identification of generic skills and competencies that are transferable to other contexts;
- the portability of credits for learning, and ultimately of qualifications, which can secure entry to other courses in formal education or training systems;
- closer vertical and horizontal articulation between education and training systems;
- a shift towards, an 'accumulation approach' and credentialing; and
- promoting the concept of life-long learning and blurring the distinction between education and training.

It is interesting that the only reference to 'lifelong learning' in the final NEPI general report, *The Framework report and final report summaries*, is the above quote in the attached summary of the *Adult basic education* report. So here the term 'lifelong learning' is used to broaden and place an emancipatory gloss on the 'competency' discourse that was increasingly being imported from the world of training into the discussions on a new education system.

Thus, the first major education policy option documents of the new South Africa gave little attention to lifelong learning and what attention was given provided somewhat backhanded compliments—lifelong learning is either unrealizable utopian dream or a bit of political cosmetics to cover up the growing dominance of competency based frameworks. At best, that lifelong education was being discussed at all is some indication that the concept was circulating in the South African educational environment. But of the two competing versions of 'lifelong learning'—the one visionary and all encompassing, the other driven by narrower interests related to training, competency and the world of work—it is clear which version was likely to become the more dominant.

### **The African National Congress and its educational policies**

The Policy framework for Education and Training written by the Education Department of the ANC in 1994 provided a clear vision for a new Education and Training system that advocated lifelong learning (African National Congress 1995: 3):

We believe that education and training are basic human rights. It follows that:

- The right to education and training should be enshrined in a Bill of Rights which should establish principles and mechanisms to ensure that there is an enforceable and expanding minimum floor of entitlements for all.
- All individuals should have access to lifelong education and training irrespective of race, class, gender, creed or age.

The new national learning system would have as one of its basic principles ‘The right of the individual to access lifelong learning and training’ (1995: 17) and what was meant by lifelong learning appears later on in the document (1995: 77):

The reconstruction and development of the education and training system in line with the goal of lifelong learning requires that we radically transform the way in which the delivery of education and training is organized. The conventional educational system, its assumptions, structures and practices, in particular, its focus on the teacher and the school as the central delivery agents, is not capable of, and indeed it is a barrier to, the achievement of lifelong learning for all. To meet the challenge of lifelong learning successfully, we need to reorganize the delivery of education and training within an open learning framework.

Open learning is an approach to education and training which seeks to remove all unnecessary barriers to learning, thus increasing access to, and allowing people to take advantage of, learning opportunities throughout their lives. It is an approach in which education and training ceases to be an activity that only occurs within the walls of a school, conducted by a teacher and primarily aimed at young people. The focus of open learning is on the learner and the outcomes of learning. Learning takes place in a number of contexts, in a multiplicity of sites, through a variety of mechanisms, and for people of all ages.

This document places Lifelong learning as the core of the vision for a new education and training system that has to achieve the following purposes (1995: 17):

Education and training have a crucial role to play in contributing to social and economic development through empowering individuals to actively participate in all aspects of the economy. The latter requires that the education and training system addresses three issues: *first*, the need for equity and redress; *second*, the need to continually upgrade skill levels in line with the rapidly changing and dynamic nature of the world economy and universal knowledge base; *third*, to recognize the validity and interdependence of all forms of knowledge and the value of prior learning and experience by integrating the education and training systems under a single national credit-based qualifications framework.

The document also places strong emphasis on the structural changes required and the role of lifelong learning in helping to bring these about.

The other key ANC policy document was *The Reconstruction and Development Programme* (African National Congress 1994). This document says little about lifelong learning (the phrase is used once in relation open learning paths) but is important for its insistence on the integration of education and training, the creation of a qualifications framework and the importance of adult basic education and training.

### **Lifelong learning rhetoric in the post-apartheid educational policies**

Little more than a year after the NEPI reports were published, South Africa had a new democratic government and adult education activists had high hopes that adult education (and particularly adult basic education) would now gain some degree of prioritization and that there would indeed be the beginnings of what could be called lifelong learning. I and others have written elsewhere (Bhola 1997, Aitchison 1998, 1999, 2003a, 2003b, Castle 1999, Aitchison *et al.* 2000, Groener 2000) of how the adult education activists contributed to the post-April 1994 policy gains but were soon disappointed by the massive implementation failures and continuing marginalization of the adult education field. But ‘lifelong learning’ was rapidly adopted in government communications as a rhetorical shorthand term for all that was desirable in a system of education. This rhetoric is most visible in a number of education and training white papers, discussion and policy documents published from 1994 to 2001. These papers are important in that they lay down the policy foundations for a supposed massive shift away from the past *apartheid* education systems as well as towards the global environment into which South Africa was both now to be readmitted and overwhelmed. Clearly, if lifelong learning was to have any substantive impact on the new educational dispensation, it would be heralded and detailed in these documents.

### **The first education white paper**

The first *White paper on Education and Training* appeared in 1995. It outlined a broad vision of what the Ministry of Education hoped to achieve in education and training and enunciated policy principles about how it was going to do it within the ambit of the relatively radical national Reconstruction and Development Programme (on which a White Paper was also issued).

A key policy principle was that education and training were to be seen together as an integrated whole and this implied a ‘view of learning which rejects a rigid division between ‘academic’ and ‘applied’, ‘theory’ and ‘practice’, ‘knowledge’ and ‘skills’, ‘head’ and ‘hand’ (these divisions now being associated with ‘old occupational and social class distinctions’ and ‘the ethnic structure of economic opportunity and power’) (Chapter 2, Section 4).<sup>3</sup>

The purpose of education and training was to serve human resource development (Chapter 2, Section 3) and this indicated a decided shift in discourse from that of the days of struggle radicalism towards that of the business sector’s language.

The paper advocated a new National Qualification Framework (NQF) based on a system of credits for learning outcomes achieved, which would do amazing things

for education and training, *inter alia*, encourage creative curriculum design, the recognition of prior learning and 'open doors of opportunity for people whose academic or career paths have been needlessly blocked because their prior knowledge (acquired informally or by work experience) has not been assessed and certified, or because their qualifications have not been recognized for admission to further learning, or employment purposes' (Chapter 2, Section 7).

The actual words, 'lifelong learning' appear only a few times in the White Paper. It was linked to human resource development: there is an 'emerging consensus on the importance of lifelong learning as the organizing principle of a national human resource development strategy' and the 'concept of lifelong learning organized in terms of a National Qualification Framework, is incorporated in the human resource development strategy of the government's Reconstruction and Development Programme' (Chapter 2, Section 9). But it is also used in the more inspirational passages (in Chapter 4 on the *Values and Principles of Education and Training Policy* in Sections 5, 6 and 13) which speak about the learners and their rights, for example:

The over-arching goal of policy must be to enable all individuals to value, have access to, and succeed in lifelong education and training of good quality. Educational and management processes must therefore put the learners first, recognizing and building on their knowledge and experience, and responding to their needs. An integrated approach to education and training will increase access, mobility and quality in the national learning system.

The system must increasingly open access to education and training opportunity of good quality, to all children, youth and adults, and provide the means for learners to move easily from one learning context to another, so that the possibilities for lifelong learning are enhanced. The Constitution guarantees equal access to basic education for all. The satisfaction of this guarantee must be the basis of policy. It goes well beyond the provision of schooling. It must provide an increasing range of learning possibilities, offering learners greater flexibility in choosing what, where, when, how and at what pace they learn.

The realization of democracy, liberty, equality, justice and peace are necessary conditions for the full pursuit and enjoyment of lifelong learning. It should be a goal of education and training policy to enable a democratic, free, equal, just and peaceful society to take root and prosper in our land, on the basis that all South Africans without exception share the same inalienable rights, equal citizenship, and common national destiny, and that all forms of bias (especially racial, ethnic and gender) are dehumanizing.

Lifelong learning is also associated with 'open learning' (Chapter 5, Section 25):

Open learning is an approach which combines the principles of learner centredness, lifelong learning, flexibility of learning provision, the removal of barriers to access learning, the recognition for credit of prior learning experience, the provision of learner support, the construction of learning programmes in the expectation that learners can succeed, and the maintenance of rigorous quality assurance over the design of learning materials and support systems. South Africa is able to gain from world-wide experience over

several decades in the development of innovative methods of education, including the use of guided self-study, and the appropriate use of a variety of media, which give practical expression to open learning principles.

Unfortunately, when carefully re-read, the references to 'lifelong learning' in these passages suggest that it is largely a rhetorical flourish decorating a businesslike proposal to introduce a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) that will serve the needs of developing a productive mobile workforce.

### **Building the National Qualifications Framework**

The equation of lifelong learning with a qualifications framework is again clearly seen in the Department of Education's February 1996 discussion document, *Lifelong learning through a national qualifications framework. Report of the Ministerial committee for development work on the NQF*, which was itself heavily influenced by the Human Sciences Research Council publication *Ways of seeing the National Qualifications Framework* and by the example of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority. The document's vision is of an education and training system that would have 'an integrated approach which would address the learners' and nation's needs' (1996: 4)—and the mechanism for achieving this is the national qualifications framework, already set up in the South African Qualifications Authority Act of 1995, which had as an objective precisely the creation of 'an integrated national framework for learning achievements and to enhance access to, and mobility and quality within, education and training' (1996: 4).

The original brief of the ministerial committee that authored the document had been rather tightly prescribed (1996: 8). It had to formulate proposals for a NQF curriculum framework that was modular and which would have standards setting, registering, monitoring, accrediting, certifying and auditing bodies. The extremely formal nature of the envisioned framework is notable, as is the fact that it nowhere mentions lifelong learning. In a set of 31 largely technical recommendations (1996: 10–13), there is very little evidence of any conceptual or paradigm shifts and only one reference to lifelong learning. The latter is in recommendation 27 where it is stated that standards writing for NQF levels 1 to 4 (that is, mainly initial schooling) should be managed by the national Department of Education '(or a National Institute for Lifelong Learning Development)', which was a new name for a proposed National Institute on Curriculum Development, which would have provincial counterparts. Though some documents were issued by the Department of Education in the name of this institute, it was never actually set up.

The discussion document states that an integrated approach to education and training means (1996: 20):

Perceptions of what knowledge is, of how people learn, and of how learning should and could be organized, need to change. Knowledge can no longer be equal to content only but must be recognized as having an interdependent relationship with skills and attitudes—all of which contribute towards competence. Learning will no longer be the sole property of formal education but can take place anywhere, at any time and through any means, provided that it meets nationally required standards.

One can but note the somewhat emaciated view of knowledge. Content remains the only actual description of knowledge and knowledge is simply a component of 'competence' (itself equated with gaining the required number of NQF credits to get a qualification! (1996: 26)). Similarly, although learning can supposedly take place anywhere, anytime, by any means, it is only 'learning' if it meets nationally required standards!

The document then goes on to enunciate what it sees as the key conditions that will have to be met if the 'vision of lifelong learning advocated in *The White Paper* [of 1995] will become a reality' (1996: 21):

- Suitable career/learning advice, placement testing, and assessment programmes for the recognition of prior learning must be available to guide learners.
- Alternative learning programmes must exist for a range of learners who are unable to attend education and training institutions either on a full-time or on a regular part-time basis.
- Learners must be equipped to take advantage of open learning and multi-media education and training opportunities.
- Providers must be supported in developing courses and materials accessible to this range of new learners.
- Providers must be monitored and supported in meeting quality assurance criteria.
- Learning programmes must lead to nationally recognized, portable credits that are equivalent across all types of providers and across provinces.
- These credits must lead to nationally recognized, legitimate and credible qualifications.
- There must be coherent career/learning pathways that ensure relevance and progression.

It also adopts a set of key principles relating to the NQF and originally proposed in the National Training Strategy process and listed in *Ways of seeing the National Qualifications Framework*. These key principles become the standard, mantra like, preamble to many subsequent education and training pronouncements, namely: Integration, Relevance, Credibility, Coherence, Flexibility, Quality, Legitimacy, Access, Progression, Portability, Articulation, Recognition of prior learning, Guidance of learners, Democratic participation, and Equality of opportunity (1996: 21–22). Though these principles have a certain banal desirability, it is notable that the economic is valorized (education and training are part of a human resource development policy, relevance means relevance to national economic, social and political development needs, it is career pathways which are important) and education and training progression is conceptualized in terms of the accumulation of credits for reaching nationally approved standards.

Section 2 of the discussion document talks portentously of new paradigms and the rationale for moving to a new paradigm but is essentially a fairly technical discussion of the definitions of outcomes (nominally Spady's 1992 one, though rather broadly interpreted as 'everything learnt' (1996: 25)), competence (curiously equated with what the required number of credits is to receive a qualification, outcomes-based learning, unit standards and unit standards based qualifications). As with all outcomes-based education, the assumption is clear that the educators

know what are the desired, agreed upon outcomes within a particular context, and curriculum developers work backwards from them. The authors make rather clumsy attempt to demonstrate how to avoid outcomes-based learning being seen as prescriptive and behaviourist, by saying that it is not detailed and prescriptive but broad, flexible and general and should be done in a way that is holistic and developmental (1996: 27). As a demonstration it is ludicrous, made worse by a table, credited to the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, that purports to show the difference between 'objectives' (which are about teaching inputs) and 'outcomes' (which are about students learning)!<sup>4</sup>

Later on, the document refers to the proposed National Institute for Lifelong Learning and Development (NILLD) and provincial counterparts and says that 'The name of the proposed Institute reflects the shift away from content-based learning to lifelong learning through a multiplicity of providers and venues' (1996: 45).

Most of the text is in fact technical, and often confused, discussions of outcomes-based education, the NQF, standards and modularization—on the latter, it presents a quite extraordinary argument as to why modularization is good in adult basic education and training but really bad in schooling (1996: 55):

The school curriculum becomes more coherent, meaningful and interesting for children if it is as integrated and holistic as is practically possible. ... This argument is supported by changing theories of language, theory, and cognition which, broadly summarized, could be said to be moving from 'transmission' to 'constructivist' models. The new paradigm suggests that learners construct meaning best if the learning experiences offered are linked, coherent, and contextualized, rather than fragmented or disjointed. ... There are no similar objections to the modularization of the ABET levels. On the contrary, accumulative modules to be acquired at the learners' convenience contribute to the effectiveness of the system, increasing access, flexibility, and portability. ... Recognition of the need for learning to be meaningfully contextualized and interlinked lends strength to the calls for rules of combination to govern this modular learning.

### Other White Papers

The next White Paper of interest, Education White Paper 3—*A Programme for Higher Education Transformation*, published in August 1997, also has some inspiring things to say about education's role in supporting people-driven development and societal transformation as outlined in the Reconstruction and Development Programme (1997: 7, Section 1.3):

- To meet the learning needs and aspirations of individuals through the development of their intellectual abilities and aptitudes throughout their lives. Higher education equips individuals to make the best use of their talents and of the opportunities offered by society for self-fulfilment. It is, thus, a key allocator of life chances an important vehicle for achieving equity in the distribution of opportunity and achievement among South African citizens.
- To address the development needs of society and provide the labour market, in a knowledge-driven and knowledge-dependent society, with the ever-changing

high-level competencies and expertise necessary for the growth and prosperity of a modern economy. Higher education teaches and trains people to fulfil specialized social functions, enter the learned professions, or pursue vocations in administration, trade, industry, science and technology and the arts.

- To contribute to the socialization of enlightened, responsible and constructively critical citizens. Higher education encourages the development of a reflective capacity and a willingness to review and renew prevailing ideas, policies and practices based on a commitment to the common good.

This mix of discourses—education for lifelong self-fulfilment as enlightened, responsible and constructively critical citizens *and* to meet the needs of the labour market—is also seen in the role for higher education (1997: 10, Section 1.12) being human resource development, high-level skills training, and the production, acquisition and application of new knowledge to aid national growth and competitiveness.

Lifelong learning is spoken of in the White paper but four times. Higher education has to provide lifelong learning opportunities (1997: 12, Section 1:20), produce graduates with the skills and competencies that build the foundations for lifelong learning (1997: 14, Section 1.27), ‘open its doors, in the spirit of lifelong learning, to workers and professionals in pursuit of multiskilling and reskilling, and adult learners whose access to higher education had been thwarted in the past.’ (1997: 17, Section 2.2), and, ‘distance education and resource-based learning approaches have huge potential for integrating lifelong learning into the basic shape and structure of higher education’ (1997: 27, Section 2.63). But, as with the first Education White Paper, lifelong learning is essentially a nice sounding rhetorical flourish to a policy that seeks to subordinate higher education to the needs of the labour market.

White Paper, No 4, *A Programme for the transformation of Further Education and Training. Preparing for the twenty-first century through education, training and work*, published in September 1998, has a similar basic position: further education and training are to be integrated and must enhance learner mobility and progression (in terms of the NQF) (1997: 10, Section 2.1) and its purpose and mission is ‘to respond to the human resource needs of our country for personal, social, civic and economic development’ (1997: Section 2.7). Positive changes envisaged are that it should cater for a wider range of learners including out-of-school youth and young and old adults (1997: 14, Section 2.3) and be flexible and have an open learning environment (1997: 15, Section 2:10). ‘Open learning approaches and a system increasingly orientated towards lifelong learning and responsiveness to the needs of learners and communities, will widen participation, promote equity and social mobility, and improve the quality of life of our people’ (1997: 16, Section 2:13). It will aid ‘career development, access to higher education, lifelong learning and personal and community development’ (1997: 26, Section 4.4).

Although White Paper 4 only mentions lifelong learning twice, it does actually present the more visionary conception of lifelong learning and even supplies a definition of it as (1997: Glossary):

ongoing learning through a continuously supportive process that stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire and apply the knowledge, values, skills and critical understanding required to confidently and creatively respond and rise to the challenges of a changing social, political and economic environment

and sees lifelong learning in the context of redress for apartheid, responsible citizenship, and participation in the 'knowledge society' or the 'learning society' (1997: 29, Section 4:17):

The reconstruction and development of our nation after decades of colonial and apartheid rule place many new and urgent requirements on our national education and training system. These include redress of past discriminatory practices, the nurturing of a responsible citizenship grounded in our democratic Constitution and the development of the knowledge and skills base of the economy and society. When these are combined with the international cultures of Lifelong Learning and the Knowledge Society, the implications for the development of a new learning system, and in particular for curricula and qualifications, are dramatic.

The vision is indeed quite grand though the document is somewhat vague on how it would be implemented (1997: 36, Section 5.3):

Our open learning philosophy and programme-based approach to provision will encourage institutional diversity, the use of multiple sites of learning and the growth of 'virtual' institutions. Learning will take place in the workplace, at community facilities and in learners' private homes. Some learners will use the Internet and other technologies to access learning via a 'web' or network of providers who might be located very far apart and who need have no formal, centralized organization or structure. Open learning systems and an integrated approach to education and training will thus allow people to learn what they want, when they want and in the form they want, to satisfy their cultural, spiritual, career, personal development and other needs.

In relation to the prospects for further education and training, what Kraak and Hall wrote soon after in 1999 is suggestive (1999: 29–30):

In the first instance, this expansion and diversity in programme delivery has been an economic response. The information economy has required a better educated and trained work force, and this has been reflected in the massive expansion of technical, vocational, career and paraprofessional programmes offered in recurrent, continuing and distance modes. 'Lifelong learning' has become the all-encompassing catch phrase that gives expression to the dramatic changes occurring in the new modes of learning, in the diverse age groups of learners and in the wide range of programmes on offer.

In the second instance, growth in recurrent and continuing education is an educational response, an attempt to improve the learning methodologies available to adult learners and to provide more opportunities for community and self-development. As such, FET institutions today are much more responsive to the social and community demands placed on them to serve as effective public resources open to all. For example, most part-time, recurrent and continuing education is occurring within 'open learning' systems, a combination of residential or contact-mode teaching alongside distance education

methods and, in some instances, with the assistance of information and communication technologies. This new open learning methodology is particularly appealing to employers and employees. Employers are concerned about the loss of working hours due to staff in training, and therefore approve of open learning methodologies that do not take workers away from production. Employees, on the other hand, are encouraged by the ease of access to part-time study after working hours.

In South Africa, this shift to more open, massified and lifelong learning in FET has only just begun. It will require great inputs from the state, the private sector and from communities and learners themselves. In short, it is a responsibility that must be shared by all stakeholders involved, for it is only on this basis that the necessary massification of the system—a central prerequisite for economic development and social equality—can occur.

The fifth White paper—*Education White Paper 5 on Early Childhood Education. Meeting the challenge of early childhood development in South Africa*, issued in 2001—reverts to a few (three) mantra like statements that young children need to be provided with ‘a solid foundation for lifelong learning and development’ (2001a: 4, 6, 8), a phrase repeated (2001a: 4) in *Education White Paper 6 – Special Needs education: building an inclusive education and training system* published in the same year. The long-term goal is ‘to build an open, lifelong and high-quality education and training system for the 21st century’ (2001b: 45, Section 4.1.2).

To sum up, lifelong learning, though present as a key founding concept in the White Papers on South Africa’s new education system, lacks much prominence or substance.<sup>5</sup> Where it is not simply used to add a rhetorical flourish to the expressed desire for a better education system, it describes the competency or outcomes-based new qualifications framework that will serve the labour market. At worst the use of the language of lifelong learning becomes self-delusional, a pretending that a radical agenda is still being pursued when it is not.

### **Lifelong learning in the adult basic education policy and implementation documents**

In October 1997, a *Policy document on adult basic education and training* was approved, together with *A National Multi-year implementation plan for Adult Education and Training – provision and accreditation*, the latter after a quite intensive period of revision and editing work after a draft was released at a very representative conference in April that year.<sup>6</sup>

The *Policy document on Adult Basic Education and Training* declares that an open learning approach is the foundation of good practice in all adult basic education and training (ABET) and the document makes numerous references to lifelong learning.<sup>7</sup> It states (Department of Education 1997a: 11):

The Department of Education commits itself to interpreting the constitutional guarantee to basic education in terms of an open learning approach. In this regard it cites the following principles of good educational practice which should inform all initiatives in adult basic education and training:

Learner centredness;

- Lifelong learning;
- Flexibility of learning provision;
- The removal of barriers to access learning;
- The recognition of prior learning and experience;
- The provision of learner support; and
- The maintenance of rigorous quality assurance over the design of learning materials and support systems.

It was the degree to which any of these principles can be said to have been implemented in the ABET sector that became an ongoing matter of controversy. Unfortunately, there is a very limited South African literature that provides evidence of the actual practice and implementation of ABET. This is hardly surprising as, in a formal sense, ABET has only existed as a system or proto-system for eight years. The reader is, therefore, largely restricted to a number of studies emanating from the University of Natal (Harley *et al.* 1996, Aitchison 1998, 1999, Aitchison *et al.* 2000), a couple of reviews by other academics (e.g. Castle 1999, Vähämäki 1999) and to some project or campaign reviews or evaluations. But the difficulties in the implementation of ABET in the context of broader developments are well expressed in the following comments from Harbans Bhola (1997), an international expert on literacy and basic education and who was a consultant to the task team writing the multi-year implementation plan:

The new constitution of South Africa promises basic education for all including adults. In practice, however, adult basic education has come to be narrowly construed. Adult Basic Education has indeed become ABET: Adult Basic Education and Training. It has become education for economic skills. This definition of ABET is explained and expounded in the National Government's Department of Education's *Interim Guidelines* published in 1995. The Guidelines demand that the skills taught and learned should be testable, certifiable, and portable and that there should be recognition of prior learning.

In practice, ABET by focussing almost exclusively on the 'T' (i.e. Training) of labour for the formal economy has squeezed out of adult basic education the needs of the multitudes not in the formal economy. In addition, education for democratization of communities and institutions is completely sidelined.

It is sadly ironic that the training component in ABET is not being handled very well either. A considerable level of effort and national resources are being allocated to establishing standards, listing outcomes and developing tests, forgetting that tests howsoever generalized and standardized do assume the existence of teaching materials, and that learning outcomes come out of the content of curriculum embedded in teaching materials. The almost complete lack of relevant and rich teaching-learning materials is hard to understand.

There may also be a lack of understanding of the institutional and political processes involved in the transition from learning to working. Portable skills

are of no use if there is no port of entry into the labour market. Given these conditions, the ABET program may collapse under its own weight of formalism and routine – isolated from the realities of life in South Africa of today.

A *Policy Document on Adult Basic Education and Training* claimed that it ‘sought to redress some of the previous and calamitous lack of support for ABET and to encourage this basic foundation for lifelong learning.’ (p. 1, Executive summary). ABET is seen as both a right a right (as expressed in the National Constitution) and as a functional economic necessity in a changing society which requires a citizenry engaged in a lifelong process of learning (1997a: 1, executive summary).

Immediately prior to the section on integrating education and training into lifelong education, it associates its position with that of (1997a: 8):

the CONFITEA Conference in Hamburg in July 1997 where countries of the world agreed that:

‘All citizens throughout the world have the active capacity to shape the 21st century, and the creation of a learning democracy in which each woman and man has the means to lifelong self development is of utmost importance. This conference also recognized and reaffirmed the role of adult education in responding to profound changes taking place in the world, including shifting work patterns, changes in the role of the state and the growth of knowledge-based societies’.

The Department of Education’s national definition of ABET in linked to lifelong education (1997a: 8–9):

Adult basic education and training is the general conceptual foundation towards lifelong learning and development, comprising of knowledge, skills and attitudes required for social, economic and political participation and transformation applicable to a range of contexts. ABET is flexible, developmental and targeted at the specific needs of particular audiences and, ideally, provides access to nationally recognized certificates.

The policy document’s actual description of lifelong education recalls the White paper of 1995 with its stress on the integration of education and training and the vision of a opening up of access to career paths through the various levels of a national qualifications framework, though some reference is also made to non-formal adult education (1997a: 9)

The Department of Education is committed to lifelong learning on the basis of an integrated approach to education and training. This moves away from the artificial, horizontal and rigid divisions between concepts such as ‘academic’ and ‘applied’, ‘theory’ and ‘practice’, ‘knowledge’ and ‘skills’, and ‘hand’ and ‘head’ which have long characterized the organization of curricula and the distinction between education and training opportunities in South Africa. Consensus has been built between the Departments of Education and Labour and other stakeholders around a conception of

lifelong learning which will ultimately be achieved through the National Qualifications Framework. This conception is both horizontally integrated and vertically, or even diagonally, progressive. This means that learners can progress through an integrated education and training system from non-literacy through to accessing general, further and higher education and training along a continuum of learning opportunities presented on the National Qualifications Framework.

The new education and training system in South Africa emphasizes the formal articulation of education and training through the National Qualifications Framework. In the context of adult learning, however, it is important that lifelong learning encompasses both the formal and the more non-formal or informal, developmental approaches to lifelong learning. This is essential in order to ensure that learners can use the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes learnt through ABET in their daily lives.

Elsewhere, lifelong learning is spoken of as 'a continuous process which stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire and apply the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to realize their full potential' (1997a: 17).

ABET practitioners are encouraged to provide learners with 'the tools required to access lifelong learning and, in so doing, contribute towards community, provincial and national development' (1997a: 14). ABET is seen as acquiring 'real meaning in the context of lifelong learning' (1997a: 17)

Often the term 'lifelong learning' is used in phrases that suggest that it might be non-formal education and short skills development training courses alongside more formal 'further education'.<sup>8</sup> The department is committed to 'ensuring access to opportunities for further education and training and lifelong learning.' (1997a: 14). It is also seen as being part of community development strategies (1997a: 18)

Lastly, 'the national and provincial Institutes of Lifelong Learning Development as well as stakeholders, providers, other development players and educators, should give form to this developmental vision' (1997a: 17).

Generally, this policy document tried to give a more robust sense of lifelong learning but, as with all the education policy documents, it is clear that there are two competing discourses at work: the one more radical and rights based, the other looking towards the labour market. This duality is well expressed in this passage about ABET (1997a: 35):<sup>9</sup>

If, for example, adult basic education is a human right then it is justified and valued 'for its own sake'. However, functionality remains an important criterion for the justification of our work in ABET. A widespread understanding of the functional value of ABET is necessary for both political and professional reasons. If ABET is fundamental to both economic development and social justice then it is no longer merely a peripheral concern. It is an important corollary of labour market programmes and the economic restructuring of the country. This is attested to by the policy endorsement of the principles of lifelong learning development within the context of the National Qualifications Framework.

### The implementation of the ABET policies and plans

It was in the implementation that things started to go awry. Generally, the implementation of ABET was impressive at the level of policy, systematization, standardization and regulations (see Department of Education 2001c: 14–15) but weak to disastrous on the ground in practice and growth. It is not the purpose of this article to give a detailed account of the implementation of ABET in South Africa since 1995 and the national Department of Education (2001c) has produced a useful report on this, *Building an ABET System: The First Five Years' 1995–2000 years* (though its statistics are extremely unreliable). The University of Natal has also produced a number of national and provincial reports on ABET implementation and its failures (Aitchison 2000, Aitchison *et al.* 2000, Baatjes *et al.* 2001).

Lifelong learning, which is inevitably linked to democratization of education, currently sits uneasily with ABET when the latter's ideological orientation is confused (and often deliberately so) in the key policy texts (see Adams 2000). Currently, it appears as if the steady formalization of adult literacy and basic education is aligned with the functional role that ABET is seen as playing in relation to the labour market. It is fair to say that current South African ABET policies and practices, in spite of much rhetoric about lifelong learning, are increasingly locking into complicated and heavily structured programmes and qualifications that look remarkably like, if not being identical to, those already entrenched in schooling. Although the NQF purports to embody desirable attributes such as relevance, flexibility, access, portability and recognition of prior learning, the actual language by which it is described is complicated, jargon filled and by no means simple. For example, the interim rules for structuring a General Education and Training Certificate for ABET are so complex that it is unlikely that the average ABET learner would understand them without considerable instruction and guidance within a formal education setting.

French (2002: 1) puts the situation succinctly:

ABET (Adult Basic Education and Training) was both a product and a cornerstone of the movement that led to the creation of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and the National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS). It is therefore ironic that, as these two linked institutions of lifelong learning become operational, ABET is marginalized, impoverished, generally in decline and, arguably at least, in a terminal condition. There are pockets of vitality in all ABET sectors. There have been ambitious achievements in policy and planning. But even the earlier tendency toward wishful thinking in this field now seems to be in abeyance – except, perhaps, in official reports.

The unrealized potential of adult education for the illiterate and under educated in South Africa—and the wide spread recognition in civil society that the implementation of ABET and literacy campaigns has at best been lacklustre and, at worst, disastrous—lead to questions about where wrong turnings were made and to what extent the delusional rhetoric of lifelong learning concealed problems.

The announcement in April 2001 of a new National Skills Development Strategy (Department of Labour 2001) proffered some new hope. The first objective of the strategy was 'developing a culture of high quality life-long learning' with quite specific success indicators (2001: 18):

By March 2005, 70 per cent of workers have at least a Level One qualification on the National Qualifications Framework.

By March 2005, a minimum of 15 per cent of workers to have embarked on a structured learning programme, of whom at least 50 per cent have completed their programme satisfactorily

By March 2005, an average of 20 enterprises per sector, (to include large, medium and small enterprises), and at least five national government departments, to be committed to, or have achieved, an agreed national standard for enterprise-based people development.

But the report on the progress from April 2001 to March 2002 (Department of Labour 2002) indicated that objective one was far from being achieved. To meet the goal of 70% of workers having at least Level One on the NQF meant that some 904 993 workers located in levy paying organizations should achieve an NQF level 1 qualification by 2005. By the end of March 2002, only 57 729 workers (that is, only 6% of the target) were participating in appropriate programmes, though one of the four years had passed (2002: 6). The Department ascribed this slowness partly to the fact that 'little or no adult basic education and training was taking place in the workplace' (2002: 11).

Hence, the hope that the National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS) is a major source of hope for new life in ABET, the foundation of lifelong learning, may not be well founded. This is because the NSDS itself contains tensions that currently favour high-level skills rather than the quest for equity. At the same time, the trend in many industries to only employ people with secondary school qualifications and to phase out those with little formal education, exacerbates the problem.

### **Early warnings about the practicality of lifelong learning**

An early warning about the rhetoric of lifelong learning was made as early as 1994 by Andre Kraak, who had been an influential theorist working on Human Resources Development policy for the National Education Policy Investigation. In an article—'Lifelong learning and reconstruction: *can it deliver?*'—published in the *South African Labour Bulletin* (Kraak 1994), he argued that though the new African National Congress/Congress of South African Trade Unions had produced coherent proposals for reconstructing education in South Africa these proposals faced a number of serious problems, especially in relation to lifelong learning.

Kraak (1994: 32) summarizes these proposals (meant to overcome the narrowly defined and task-specific vocational courses of the past and the irrelevance of most academic courses in schools to the workplace) as:

- a unified and integrated education and training system, with a strong commitment to lifelong learning;
- a competency-based modular curriculum framework; and
- active labour market policies.

As Kraak puts it (1994: 32–33):

The ANC and COSATU have proposed a system of ‘lifelong learning’ spanning both education and training and school and post-school learning. This system will entail a modular form of progression from one skill level to the next. Certificates for all learning will be issued by a single qualifications authority. This certification structure will have the explicit aim of maximizing learners’ mobility between and within differing education and training institutions. For example, as COSATU has forcefully argued, even a street sweeper should be able to progress through the entire Education and training system to the level of production engineer. Clearly, such a model has enormous implications for the skilling and empowerment of the working class. ... This system of modular progression through the education system is entirely dependent on a competency-based curriculum ... The progression of workers along this modular education and training ladder is increased by the implementation of ‘active’ labour market policies.

These active labour markets were seen as requiring continuous skill formation and lifelong learning (built upon a broad foundation of education and training) to enable maximum mobility across differing employment sectors. They would lead to a reduction of unemployment through retraining and job placement programmes and of race-, class- and gender-based labour market discrimination. But they could only be implemented by an interventionist state and through social contract arrangements between the state, capital and labour.

Kraak foresaw the following problems associated with lifelong learning (1994: 34–39):

1. *It was a myth that all workers at all occupational levels in all sectors will be able to progress up the occupational and wage ladder if they acquire higher skills* because all economic systems require a hierarchical division of labour. This did not mean that lifelong learning is not essential to the task of radically restructuring the organization of work and for equipping workers with, for example, literacy, numeracy, problem-solving and information technology skills. These workers will become more multi-skilled and productive – but they will not always shift to a higher occupational level.
2. *Competency-based models of curriculum design internationally are highly controversial*, and in South Africa such an approach is likely to meet with substantial opposition from both academics and teachers in formal education, fearing that a narrow competency-driven modular curricula will be imposed on education. Competency models assume that all learning activities can be compartmentalized into separate units, which can then be learnt consecutively, one unit after the other. However, this fragmentation of knowledge has the danger of excluding imagination, creativity and innovation—qualities that cannot easily be measured in quantifiable units, but which are central to a good general education. Within the industrial sector, competency-based training methods are fairly widespread but tend to trap workers into highly task-specific roles. Competency becomes a very convenient tool for cost-conscious employers, who eagerly apply it to the task of deskilling artisanal labour. In addition, competency models are highly resource-intensive and costly (each modular unit requires a curriculum),

and their capacity to promote learning is questionable: 'The drafters of the ANC/COSATIJ policy are aware of these problems, yet they defend lifelong learning on the grounds that their approach involves a broad interpretation of competency—one which provides both a sound general education and vocationally specific skills' (1994: 35). Kraak argues that it 'would be a tragedy if the current education system, which has failed to develop to the full the intellectual capacities of the majority of people in this country, is replaced by a system destined to do further damage' (1994: 35).

3. *Much of the enthusiasm for lifelong learning is based on the false assumption that employers will implement the changes they had agreed upon.* Instead employers may refuse because of the higher costs involved in developing human resources and the linking of continuous skill formation to the upgrading of workers and the payment of higher wages. Furthermore, the mass of people still do not understand the complexities of the lifelong learning models.
4. Advocates of lifelong learning and a more export-oriented manufacturing sector rely heavily on another possibly *false assumption that the South African economy has exhausted the economic benefits of Fordist methods of production and is now on the verge of a transition to post-Fordism.*
5. The *emphasis in the policies on comprehensive planning, the capacity for which may be weak,* and therefore mean that implementation will be shaped primarily by market forces.

Much as Kraak feared, these problems have manifested themselves since 1994 and ways that Kraak suggested dealing with them, as listed below (1994: 39), remain largely unimplemented:

- Develop economic and educational policies that recognize the unevenness between economic sectors and which ensure that social resources are redistributed from advantaged economic sectors to those that face economic impoverishment.
- Win support for lifelong learning from key constituencies in education and industry, and engage capital in negotiations about lifelong learning from a position of strength.
- Investigate ways in which the obvious mobility benefits of lifelong learning can be retained without the use of narrow competency models.
- Develop realistic proposals with regard to career progression—proposals that acknowledge the limits on mass upward mobility.
- Plan all social policies *comprehensively* so that, taken together, they ensure increased social equality and economic growth. In isolation of such an approach, individual policies will represent mere ad-hoc tinkering with insignificant levels of social change taking place.

### **The vision reaffirmed**

In 1999, two reports were commissioned by the national Department of Education and both adopted a much reinigorated attitude to lifelong learning, though neither, once delivered in 2000, were published or publicized in any way.

The first report was that by Shirley Walters and Kathy Watters on *Lifelong Learning Development: Towards a Learning Nation*, which paid particular attention to higher education. The authors argued that, driven by the imperatives of late capitalism, lifelong learning had become a key concept in educational thought. For South Africa, lifelong learning was needed for two reasons: South Africa's reinsertion into the global economy, and the political and social equity and redress requirements of post-apartheid society. For them the very nature of lifelong learning was broad and cross-sectoral—it included formal and non-formal education, adult and community education and workplace-based learning, together with learning taking place in libraries and museums and with electronically transmitted and stored data and in cultural events and other learning environments. They recognized that lifelong learning was sometimes seen as a panacea for virtually every educational and human resources development ill and that current policy discourse on it was confused and ambiguous (and currently steadily losing its connection to the social purpose that in South Africa sees lifelong education as integral to the struggle for substantive democracy and social justice). However, they identified two main current conceptions. One was a broad conceptual framework that had a comprehensive and particular understanding of educational priorities, of the strategies required to address these, and a fundamental assertion of a radically different and distinct pedagogy. The other conception was of lifelong learning as mainly about ensuring equity of access and provision. Their overall summing up is reasonably positive (Walters and Watters 2000):

As with many countries, we in South Africa are at an early stage in the development of a comprehensive approach to lifelong learning. We have made a start through production and adoption of various policy documents and the construction of various, necessary component parts of a lifelong learning system.

However, they note that the operationalizing of some of these necessary components has meant an intense process of learning a new and jargon-filled language related to the newly constructed systems and that this process has absorbed so much energy that it has been difficult to hold on to the overall vision for lifelong learning in a learning society that was articulated in 1994.

In relation to adult basic and higher education, Walters and Watters, following Belanger (1994), note that as the quality and quantity of learning that takes place in initial education largely determines the pattern of lifelong learning for individuals, it is important to ensure that initial education institutions consciously foster lifelong learning. And, following Candy *et al.* (1994) and University of the Western Cape (1997), they provide a useful list of indicators of a lifelong learning higher education institution). The two writers suggest the following steps:

1. Clarify what lifelong learning means in the South African context and see the goal of human development and democratic citizenship and the goal of human resources development and the market as intimately dependent on each other but accept that choosing which goal to prioritize is a political decision.
2. Develop a conceptual framework for lifelong learning.
3. Develop a clear implementation plan that avoids 'those who have more get more'.

4. Create a strong structure mandated to hold the Lifelong learning concept and operational plans that is highly visible and capable of working across sectors as well as up and down structures and systems.

The work of Walters (1999) and Watters and Walters (2000) clearly influenced *The Cape Town Statement on Characteristic Elements of a Lifelong Learning Higher Education Institution* of January 2001 drafted at a Conference on 'Lifelong Learning, Higher Education and Active Citizenship' in Cape Town on 10 October 2000. The Statement makes much use of various international pronouncements linking higher education and lifelong learning. Overall, the statement sees that 'a key purpose of lifelong learning is active citizenship' and that 'lifelong learning enables students to learn at different times, in different ways, for different purposes at various stages of their lives and careers. Lifelong learning is concerned with providing learning opportunities throughout life, while developing lifelong learners'. Much of the document is concerned with various performance indicators that should characterize a lifelong learning higher education institution.

The other major report was prepared by the South African Institute for Distance Education (SAIDE) for the Department of Education. The report, *Open Learning in South Africa: General and Further education and training* argued that a number of educational principles could be clustered around the concept of lifelong learning include the following:

- learner-centredness;
- flexibility in learning;
- removal of unnecessary barriers to access;
- open learning;
- learner support;
- recognition of prior learning experiences and current competencies;
- expectations of success; and
- cost-effectiveness.

Many of these principles were common constituents of the policy language of the White Papers and other policy documents and of the rhetoric associated with the NQF and the outcomes-based education being imposed on general schooling. However, in practice, the lack of an integrated approach to using these principles has resulted in a number of problems. By applying the principles selectively, mainly at the level of system rather than curriculum, it has been possible for providers to claim *openness* (and, by implication, quality) when little or no attention has been directed to improving the quality of learning (e.g. large numbers of students might be admitted into institutions and programmes simply because of the income their fees will generate). *Learner centredness* soon became emaciated under the weight of curriculum burdened by the prescriptions embodied in unit standards prepared by centralized standards generation bodies dominated by the representatives of business and commercial training firms. *Flexibility in learning* that would respond to what learners wanted to learn and how they wanted to learn and when and where was similarly stillborn. The *removal of unnecessary barriers to access* to educational opportunities, though attempted in some fields (for example, admission to postgraduate studies for school teachers without degrees), was resisted in many other fields (particularly in relation to admission to universities), and, of course, the major barrier remained—that of the cost of education and training (for, in many cases, the situa-

tion became worse as the state subsidization of various forms of education declined). *Recognition of prior learning*, something that had been absolutely central to the labour movement's ideas on the new education and training dispensation proved inordinately recalcitrant of implementation (for obvious and perfectly understandable reasons). However, South Africa's historical devotion to the 'diploma disease' was now in fact exacerbated by bureaucrats with the infection who increasingly dominated the management of the new qualifications framework and its offshoots. *Learner support*—the providing of continuing support, advice and counselling throughout the lifelong learning process—was in little evidence given the failures in plain provision to adults. The intricacies of the new qualifications framework and qualifications also often meant that guidance often became more difficult, not less. *Expectations of success* were raised because of the often vulgar misinterpretations of outcomes-based rather than norm-based assessment, which suggested for many that in future nobody would ever fail anything! But, in sectors such as ABET, the actual throughput of learners with a General Certificate of Education was absolutely abysmal (Aitchison and Harley 2004). The concept of *cost-effectiveness*, which should represent the right balance between cost, student numbers, and educational quality, a balance which will be entirely different for different educational contexts, in practice was usually little more than an attempt to both work out unit costs and to persuade learners to pay more by way of fees.

On lifelong learning itself, the document (South African Institute for Distance Education 2000: ch. 1 and ch. 2) affirmed that the principle of lifelong learning was that all people learn throughout life and that this reality should be affirmed and capitalized on and enhanced (though it recognized that this concept was contested). Clearly, viewed in this way, lifelong education has strong communal and co-operative elements and little in common with a schooling mode of thought.

The concept of lifelong learning is central to openness. It argues that learning should continue throughout life, rather than being limited to childhood, and should be of direct relevance to the needs and life experience of learners. The concept of lifelong learning also implies an acknowledgement of the reality that learning is a process in which all people are inevitably involved from birth until death and a consequent attempt to make structured educational opportunities available to people throughout their lives. The following definition of lifelong learning puts forward this perspective quite clearly, thus suggesting a need to re-conceptualize what is meant by the process of 'learning':

Lifelong learning is not restricted to the kinds of learning that take place in schools, nor does it lead only to the acquisition of school-like information. It is a comprehensive phenomenon including traditional schooling and vocational learning, but going beyond learning as it is traditionally understood in formal education systems, and including learning leading to self-development or self-actualization. Such learning is affected by a whole spectrum of influences and not just by what happens in schools and related institutions. These influences range from the highly systematic and organized (such as conventional schools) to the unsystematic and unorganized (such as a parent playing with a child). Learning is thus something which lasts a lifetime (it is 'lifelong'), and is also related to the whole range of influences people encounter in the course of living their lives.

On the impact of lifelong learning on curriculum development, it argued that such curriculum needed 'to integrate formal, non-formal, and informal learning. Whether focused primarily on vocational, general formative, professional development or personal development, programmes need to take cognisance of the other dimensions, leading to an emphasis on whole person curricula'. There should also be an emphasis on generic transferable skills (particularly problem solving, information literacy and development of student independence), and programmes should equip learners with reflective practice and critical self-awareness. Mastery of the content of a specific occupational field or discipline would be less important than development of a broad base of knowledge and skills which learners can use to meet new occupational and life challenges.

The report suggested a wide range of criteria for judging the genuine openness of programmes of learning.

### **The Southern African Development Community**

Discussions about lifelong learning has also taken place in South Africa's neighbours in the Southern African Development Community (SADC), most notably in Namibia, where, in 1997, a Presidential Commission on Education, Culture and Training recommended that the country should combine three current Ministries into one Ministry of Lifelong Learners with three main departments for schools, adult learning and higher education (Government of Namibia 1997). The commission's report also suggested that there be a central advisory council on lifelong learning, under which would be the councils for schools, adult learning, arts and culture, higher education, teacher education and science and technology. Every institution should see itself as a lifelong learning institution. This would mean that schools, colleges, or universities would not only busy themselves with the learning of their own learners, but would make their facilities available to other learning programmes and employers and unions would work towards a 'learning organization'.

In November 2001, the first meeting of the Southern African Development Community's Technical Committee on lifelong education and training met and *inter alia* considered some of the theoretical and practical difficulties with the concept of lifelong education and/or learning and what it is and is not.<sup>10</sup> Some of these problems that the Technical Committee considered were:

- Is lifelong education the same as lifelong learning? The committee distinguished between the two terms and noted that whilst lifelong *education* may be the state or society's responsibility, clearly *learning* is not, it is something an individual does (or does not do).
- Do the massive financial implications of establishing a system of lifelong education, with no necessary economic benefit in return (though increasingly lifelong learning is being seen as a national necessity for economic survival), inevitably lead to talk about lifelong learning for rhetorical, inspirational and propagandist purposes but a continuation of the old educational order more or less unchanged?
- Is lifelong learning frequently confused with 'open learning', the use of new technology, or particular and separate systems or institutions (such as distance education ones) that claim to serve lifelong learning alongside conventional

education (and are probably and inevitably considered inferior to conventional education which may remain unchanged)?

- Is lifelong learning confused with adult education, or in an even more restricted sense, with adult literacy and basic education programmes, rather than seen as something that has to suffuse and transform the whole education and training system?

The statement on lifelong education and training endorsed by the Committee tried to address all of these issues (Technical Committee on Lifelong Education and Training 2001a):

#### Definition of Lifelong Education and Training

The following definition of Lifelong Education and Training (LET) was agreed on by the Technical Committee at its inaugural meeting held at Gaborone on 20 to 22 November 2001:

Lifelong education is a comprehensive and visionary concept which includes formal, non-formal and informal learning extended throughout the lifespan of an individual to attain the fullest possible development in personal, social and vocational and professional life. It views education in its totality, and includes learning that occurs in the home, school, community, and workplace, and through mass media and other situations and structures for acquiring and enhancing knowledge, skills and attitudes.

No country has as yet achieved this full goal of a lifelong learning system and it remains a visionary call for an open learning society, operating through a multiplicity of educational networks. A key purpose of lifelong learning is democratic citizenship, connecting individuals and groups to the structures of social, political and economic activity in both local and global contexts.

Lifelong education builds on and affects all existing educational providers, and extends beyond the formal educational providers to encompass all bodies and individuals involved in learning activities

Lifelong education means enabling people to learn at different times, in different ways, for different purposes at various stages of their lives and careers. Lifelong education is concerned with providing learning opportunities throughout life (and hence pays special attention to all forms of adult and continuing education), while developing lifelong learners (and hence must address the foundations young people receive in formal education for engaging in lifelong learning).

Lifelong education, in response to the constantly changing conditions of modern life, must lead to the systematic acquisition, renewal, upgrading and completion of knowledge, skills and attitudes, as are required by these changes.

In contexts where large numbers of adults are illiterate or lacking a basic education, the focus of lifelong education activities may well be largely upon

providing the foundations for lifelong learning to such disadvantaged or marginalized sectors of society.\*

\*Though such a focus is necessary and right it is necessary to avoid the concept of lifelong education being confused with or simply seen as an equivalent term for adult education, for, to be viable, lifelong learning's foundations should be laid in childhood and youth and in what happens in schooling systems. Though many adult learners have not previously been encouraged to develop as independent, critical thinkers through their schooling (where they have completed it), it is essential that schooling system, including educare, and higher education, inculcate the attitudes and competencies vital for lifelong education. If lifelong education is to become effective in SADC countries, its principles need to suffuse the whole education and training system as a whole.

A 'Strategic Plan for Lifelong Education and Training: 2002—2006' (Technical Committee on Lifelong Education and Training 2001b) was devised that included the following strategic objectives in relation to policy, systems and provision objectives:

- To promote awareness and understanding of lifelong education and training and the development of appropriate lifelong education and training policies.
- To contribute to the development of a system that removes access barriers, enables articulation between adult and non-formal education and the formal education and training system, and creates appropriate certification and recognition of prior learning.
- To encourage participation in literacy and adult basic education and training programmes to ensure achievement of universal basic education (and especially literacy and numeracy) as the foundation for lifelong education.

In spite of the statement and plan, the Committee did largely concentrate on literacy and adult basic education as the foundation of lifelong education and training until, in mid 2002, the Committee, along with the other specialized technical committees, ceased to operate because of a financial crisis in, and restructuring of, the SADC secretariat (Aitchison 2003c). South Africa's quest to have lifelong learning as a foundational principle of its educational system was proving equally difficult to implement in the whole region.

## Notes

1. Six draft chapters of a planned nine of a *Design study for the provision of non-formal education in South Africa* were released to study participants in October 1982 but the final report and the missing chapters (which included the ones containing policy recommendations) were never released, presumably because the Urban Foundation felt they went beyond what was politically possible.
2. It would be anachronistic to see this adherence to adult education as a principled pre-emptive defence against the displacement of adult education by conceptions of lifelong learning embedded in human capital discourse—there was a large degree of naivety at this stage in South Africa's educational policy development.
3. Associated with this discussion was the soon to become characteristic dichotomous listing of the new policy or practice (which was very, very good (in this case, the integration of education and training))

- alongside the old or past practice (which was very, very bad and indeed utterly evil (in this case, any distinction between knowledge and skills, the academic and the applied, was racist and classist)).
4. I can remember, in the mid-1970s, reading similar dichotomized lists purporting to show the differences between traditional teaching (evil) and objectives (good)!
  5. This lack of substance in the government's policy documents is reinforced when looking at research publications on lifelong learning in South Africa during the same period. A search of the South African National Bibliography and the NEXUS database of current and completed research using 'lifelong learning' and 'lifelong education' as key words produced, after some sifting out of inappropriate entries, a total of only 72 works from the period 1985 to 2003. An cursory examination of the titles and abstracts indicated that only about half of these (mainly in the period 1995 to 2000) had any genuine reference to lifelong learning or lifelong education (the others were really about conventional training, schooling, higher education, distance education or continuing professional education), and only a handful seemed to address lifelong learning as a substantive matter.
  6. In spite of its title, the implementation plan was solely about the implementation of adult basic education and it made no references to lifelong education at all.
  7. *A Policy document on Adult Basic Education and Training* is no longer in print but is available, with some minor rewordings and changes, on the national Department of Education's website at <http://education.gov.za/contents/documents/1.pdf> All page number references are to this current web version.
  8. In South Africa, 'further education' is both formal school and non-school education and training at the equivalent level of school grades 10 to 12, not, as in many other countries to education provision post schooling up to grade 12.
  9. The authorship of the policy document is an essay in itself on the duality. The original policy draft was commissioned to a senior staff member of the radical National Literacy Co-operation, a non-governmental literacy network. Unfortunately, he said some rude things about a change in the government's economic policy towards neo-liberalism and all these passages were stripped out leaving a near incoherent and patchwork remnant. As the conference scheduled to consider the policy document and the implementation plan were now a few weeks away, two other writers, Helene Perold and John Aitchison, were commissioned (at the insistence of the foreign funders paying for this policy work) to rescue the policy document, that they did by substantially rewriting it, attempting to conserve a broader and more humanistic vision of both lifelong learning and ABET, whilst at the same time respecting the NQF standardization and labour market concerns of the Department of Education.
  10. See Aitchison's (2001) background paper for the Committee that looked at all these issues from a South African perspective.

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