Teacher education in South Africa: Social change, quality assurance, and democracy

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Abstract

Against a background of Durkheim’s theory on changing forms of social solidarity, it is argued that social change and lack of trust have made quality assurance, as part of regulatory architecture, a seeming inevitability. There are powerful pressures for regulatory frameworks, level descriptors and specified standards that are, above all else, transparent. Implications for democracy are considered. Theory from education and political science suggests that the `enhancement’ of students their right to the means of critical understanding and to new possibilities is a necessary precondition for democracy. It is concluded that one viable possibility for promoting ‘enhancement’ lies in the involvement of teacher educators in standards setting for variants of professional qualifications they offer. In so doing, teacher educators need to maintain a distinction between the unintended homogenising consequences of outcomes in professional level descriptors, and their academic role as scholars and teachers in higher education.

THE TITLE OF THIS ARTICLE AND THE THEME OF THE SYMPOSIUM

Linking the constituent parts of the cumbersome title of this article is rather like unpacking a Russian doll because there are relationships of contingency:

- Quality Assurance (QA) can be purposeful only within specified standards;
- Standards are embedded in hierarchical level descriptors;
- Level descriptors are embedded in National Qualification Frameworks (NQFs);
- NQFs are embedded in trans-national NQFs.

This architecture of regulation, in turn, is embedded in particular kinds of political settings.

Democracy is the odd one out. At one level, democracy seems to have nothing to do with higher education. Notable scholars such as Basil Bernstein, Michael Young and Joe Muller have highlighted the distinction between academic and
everyday knowledge. In the light of this distinction, higher education is, by its very nature, elitist, stratifying, and potentially antithetical to democracy. But a more expansive gaze on democracy beyond the literal meanings of *demos* and *kratos* leads to a potentially different view of the relationship. The doyen of understandings of democracy, Robert Dahl (1989; 1998), refers to effective participation, voting equality, enlightened understanding, control of the agenda and inclusion of adults as some of the key conditions which have to be met for a society or organization to be democratic. In the context of schooling, Bernstein (1996) specifies the ‘inclusion’, ‘participation’, and ‘enhancement’ of pupils as being necessary preconditions for democracy. There is no acknowledgement in Bernstein’s work to Dahl, which makes the commonality in their formulations especially striking. For present purposes, given its particular reference to education, we accept Bernstein’s conditions for democracy. In so doing, we scarcely need further debate in order to assert that regulatory architecture and QA have an obvious contribution to make with respect to ‘inclusion’ and ‘participation’. By enhancing students’ knowledge of HE programmes, the transparency of NQFs and QA obviously contribute to more informed decision making on the part of students.

Bernstein’s concept of ‘enhancement’, with its close connection with Dahl’s ‘enlightened understanding’, has a more substantial and meaningful potential in relation to quality as realised and experienced in higher education, and thus to democracy. Bernstein explains his concept thus:

I see “enhancement” as a condition for experiencing boundaries, be they social, intellectual or personal, not as prisons, or stereotypes but as tension points condensing past and opening possible futures. Enhancement entails a discipline. It is not so much about creativity, although that may be an outcome; enhancement has to do with boundaries and experiencing boundaries as tension points between the past and possible futures. Enhancement is not simply the right to be more personally, more intellectually, more socially, more materially, it is the right to the means of critical understanding and to new possibilities (1996, 6, emphasis in original).

However, the real – and more elusive – question is whether the regulatory architecture really does, in practice, promote genuine staff scholarship and teaching that leads students to experience ‘enhancement’ through the programmes on which they make informed decisions to enroll. The answer to this question lies in:

1. how teacher educators understand and make sense of the regulatory framework, and
2. how they position themselves within it.

This article considers ways of making sense of the regulatory framework, and of possibilities for teacher educators to position themselves within it in ways that may contribute to ‘enhancement’.
CHANGES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

NQFs in England, Ireland, Scotland, New Zealand, Australia and South Africa were ‘first generation NQFs’. In the period up to 2005, a further 30 countries embarked on NQF development (Keevy 2006). The most notable recent development has been that of trans-national frameworks. Of these, the most prominent example is ‘Bologna’, or more formally, ‘A Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area’. Following the Bologna Declaration of 19 June 1999, this legal treaty signed by 29 Ministers of State provides an overarching framework comprising three cycles of qualifications with generic descriptors for each cycle based on learning outcomes and competences. The design and direction of universities is increasingly driven by ‘government agents not directly attached to university’s insides, its conflicts, save for their ministerial perspective’ (Allen 2006, 569). Bologna’s South American counterpart, the Mercusor, had its origins in the signing of the Treaty of Asuncion aimed at the creation of a common market/customs union. Developments in higher education flowed as a subsidiary consequence of the overall economic aim: ‘It took six years, of regular meetings, but we eventually agreed on a set of common standards for three professional degree programmes (medicine, agronomy and engineering)’ (Lemaitre 2005). Quality assurance is thus part and parcel of an increasingly pervasive and discursively hegemonic regulatory architecture. Impulse for the architecture is political, not educational.

Impact of such developments on the role and identity of academics is to be expected. Allen (2006, 568) puts it this way:

To be an academic in a European university is to feel increasingly interpolated by the performative force of transparency, a force (an imperative, a demand) that requires everything we do as academics to be comparable, measurable and calculable to others . . . .

With core values and mission readable in cyberspace, literal transparency is indeed the operative description.

In the wake of the 2005–2006 M.Ed. national review in South Africa, and with the current national review of other teacher education programmes beginning in 2006, teacher educators here may have similar or perhaps even stronger feelings about the shift in their work from invisibility to visibility and transparency. Their experience of regulation is of course a local manifestation of a global phenomenon. In itself, however, globalism has limited explanatory power in relation to the changes we experience. Universities have always been in the business of working with knowledge from and across the globe, and the name itself – university – is evocative of globalism.
ONE EXPLANATION FOR CHANGE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

To understand the need for QA and regulation – and just how deep-seated it is, far removed from superficial charges of ‘managerialism’ – leads us to Durkheim’s (1933) theory on differing forms of social solidarity. In this theory, the key driving force of forms of social solidarity is the division of labour. In societies with undifferentiated forms of labour, there is a ‘sameness’ in individuals. Indeed, it is this ‘sameness’ that provides the binding fabric for social solidarity. We share a common faith, and authority has a positional legitimacy simply by virtue of its being an authority. This Durkheim called ‘mechanical solidarity’ because it is an unreflexive, unquestioning form of solidarity.

As forms of labour become increasingly differentiated and specialised, so do differences amongst individuals become more pronounced. Solidarity, now more obviously precarious, comes about as individuals recognise their differences – and their occupational interdependence. ‘Organic solidarity’ draws on ties of cooperation as reciprocal relationships create a morality of co-operation. Such morality is insufficiently powerful to keep society from falling apart, however. To sustain solidarity, contract has to replace covenant. Contract is juridical expression of co-operation. When ‘mechanical’ faith and trust disappear, our interdependence is sustained by law, and by transparent forms of regulation.

These principles at play in a shift from the mechanical to the organic are evident in changes affecting higher education. As beneficiaries of a common faith, HE institutions operated very comfortably within tenets of a mechanical solidarity.

Higher education used to be a community with shared norms. When European scholars came to South America, they did not bring with them only their knowledge of science or philosophy. They brought with them customs and symbols, a complete ethos that pervaded traditional higher education. And the same happened in all countries. Higher education shared a common set of norms, and therefore could be trusted, within and across countries (Lemaitre 2005).

The key thing here is the legitimacy of authority: as the division of labour becomes increasingly specialised, then faith, trust, and covenant – the properties of the social glue that bound us together in a mechanical solidarity – disappear. At the same time, a different development augments the call for regulation. For economic reasons, belief in the importance of higher education has grown. Human capital theory has become orthodoxy and higher education is under intense scrutiny: the appropriateness of its offerings, together with its quality and effectiveness, is no longer taken-for-granted. Verification of the public good of higher education is seen to require regulation.

Thus, when the dominant form of solidarity was mechanical, and when common faith held that universities were the temples of wisdom and knowledge, they were accordingly left to chart their own course. In contrast, the manifestation
of organic solidarity is that they should function within regulatory frameworks, level descriptors, and specified standards. And above all, all such arrangements are to be transparent.

DIVISION OF LABOUR AND ORGANIC SOLIDARITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

The account we have followed might be unremarkable. The points made seem obvious and perhaps even trite. However, there is in Durkheim’s theory a sophistication that is pertinent in the context of South Africa. In this theory, the division of labour is not an outcome of human agency or other utilitarian calculation. ‘What was unique about Durkheim’s evolutionary scheme is that he believed that the division of labour was a natural, spontaneous force that creates itself regardless of what individuals desire or think they desire; in other words, a product of social, not individual, will’ (Mestrovic 1988, 55). Spontaneous is the key word in this formulation. Historically, in Durkheim’s account, when contract replaced covenant, law ‘spontaneously’ or organically came to reflect the social division of labour and interdependent social relationships. In South Africa, because of the historically skewed distribution of power along racial lines, the ‘spontaneous’ effects of an increasingly complex division of labour were thwarted by apartheid. In fact, the pattern was inverse: instead of the law coming to reflect social relationships (as Durkheim would have it), the law came to embody the social relationships the apartheid state wished to create. A two-tiered, segmented labour market evolved. The division of labour was legislatively prescribed such that access to specialised forms of labour was denied to black people; and was made artificially accessible to white people irrespective of their competence.

With the dawning of the new democratic South Africa there was a strong connection between the plans of government and the principles of an organic solidarity. Hopes of recognition of our mutual interdependence and a hitherto unknown solidarity despite our differences encapsulate the dreams of our ‘rainbow nation’. Yet again, a form of solidarity is being legislated: but this time it is the ‘organic’ form. Prominent in our law are the key indices of organic solidarity: a shift from penal to restitutive law, contract, and regulation.7

In the regulation of higher education, a key distinction, and one that ultimately affects QA via level descriptors and standards generation, is the distinction between ‘what is’ and ‘what ought to be’. In the case of South Africa (and Namibia), the rationale of the NQF has unambiguously been that of transformation. ‘The NQF is not a re-arrangement and/or collation of existing qualifications, but implies a transformation of education and training and the recognition of qualifications which result from it’ (Gertze 2002, 6, cited in Blackmur 2004, 267). In this sense, our NQF is firmly based on a vision of ‘what ought to be’. In contrast, in countries where organic solidarities developed more ‘spontaneously’, NQFs are more accepting of ‘what is’. Thus, for example,

... the reality of the Scottish system was that there were many long-established and
respected qualifications in existence. The aim of the framework was therefore one of rationalization, not creation; the intention was to create a framework which helped explain the relationships between the various existing qualifications, not to create a set of criteria from which qualifications would be designed from scratch (Gunning 1999, 5, cited in Blackmur 2004, 2).

Similarly, the EHEA framework respects long-standing academic traditions in its member states whose institutions are encouraged to package their programmes into the ‘Bolgsna’ cycles, descriptors and outcomes. This is a new form of trust based on contract within which there is self-regulation within broad consensual parameters.

TEACHER EDUCATION IN RELATION TO THE REGULATORY ARCHITECTURE

The picture thus far is one that places South African teacher educators in a higher education world in which trust and common faith in their work are ‘out’, and one in which accountability, transparency and new regulatory frameworks aimed at transformation are ‘in’. Moreover, as we have seen, with the NQF being built on ‘what ought to be’ rather than ‘what is’, academics are placed in a discursively deficit mode. Compounding the scale of the challenge faced by teachers is the probability that most universities would vote their schools of education as ‘the weakest link’: the profession they serve lacks social status, and with their heavy workloads and relatively low research outputs, teacher educators can be easily dismissed as not being pukka academics. Such perceptions may well have been exacerbated by the recent incorporation of colleges of education into South African universities.

How then might teacher educators – as scholars and as teachers – work within this seemingly constraining environment in ways that promote quality teacher education, and consequently in ways that promote democracy?

The argument put forward here is that the best chance of the regulatory framework promoting quality in teacher education practice comes about if teacher educators themselves play the role of generating the standards (or standardizing descriptors) against which the programmes they offer are ‘quality assured’. Of course, as we know from the teacher education review, there are already HEQC criteria and standards for various qualifications such as M.Ed., ACE, B.Ed., and PGCE. As teacher educators had the opportunity of contributing to these, it might also be argued that the task of standards setting has already been accomplished. However, the standards that have been produced are generic rather than specific to programme variants. Consider the following variants of M.Eds. reviewed in 2006:

- Educational Policy Studies
- Education Management, Administration and Policy
- Educational Management and Policy
- Educational Administration, Planning and Social Policy
These were the named coursework degree programmes as presented by institutions. Although the HEQC M.Ed. (Coursework) criteria and minimum standards were perfectly adequate for reviewing these programmes at a generic level, it is clear that questions remain with respect to the nuances between the various permutations of management, policy, policy studies, administration and planning. In addition, questions may be asked about the appropriate academic/professional balance within these nuanced permutations. From there one might wish to illuminate the role of the M.Ed. programmes by dissertation only, also within the domain of this array of permutations. The key point is that for the enhancement of quality inside these programmes, a deeper layer of standards is necessary. If quality is to be served, this work can be done only by academics offering these various specialist fields. This argument extends beyond achievement of the product. As numbers of teacher educators reported anecdotally in the M.Ed. review, the process of working with standards contributed significantly to their understanding of their endeavours.

To argue the case for the construction of standardising descriptors for programme specialisations is not to imply the need for capitulation to the seeming inevitability of the need for contract and regulation within a (legislated) organic solidarity. Far from it, if we again quote Durkheim:

\[ \ldots \text{it is false to believe that all regulation is the product of constraint, it happens that liberty itself is the product of regulation. Far from being antagonistic to social action, it results from social action. It is far from being an inherent property of the state of nature. On the contrary it is a conquest of society over nature \ldots [Man] can escape nature only by creating another world where he dominates nature. That world is society (1933, 386–387).}\]

In the present context, that world is not society, but the setting of standards within a regulatory framework.

At a more practical level we may argue that standards setting for QA or any other purpose is a creative act in which choices are exercised in the construction of distinctions and hierarchies within our particular field. In this sense, standards serve the kind function that Durkheim saw rules playing in society. Like rules, standards or standardizing descriptors keep things in their proper sphere and relation. ‘Far from uniting, their task is to rather to separate what has been united through the force of things, to re-establish the limits which have been transgressed and replace each in its proper sphere’ (Durkheim 1933, 119). Rules are established ‘not to attach different parts of society to one another, but, on the contrary, to put them outside one another, to mark cleanly the barriers which separate them’
(Durkheim 1933, 119). These accounts have a strong connection with Bernstein’s depiction of ‘enhancement’ cited earlier, with its emphasis on ‘experiencing boundaries’, ‘tension points’, and ‘discipline’.

In standards setting, we assert the distinctiveness of our endeavour and reclaim our territory.

At an even more practical level we might argue the case for greater precision in the standards governing teacher education in relation to standards that have been codified for other professions. Whether teaching is a profession or not is a different question not to be pursued now, but the fact remains that programmes like the B.Ed. and PGCE are professional qualifications. Standards setting for professional qualifications in teaching is nowhere nearly as well developed as that for professions such as accountancy, engineering and medicine. The latter have clear, precise, codified standards. Specification of content has long been the bedrock of such standards. However, any visit to the website of these professional associations shows that their standards have been taken into new domains such as:

- Values, attitudes and behaviours;
- Self analytical and research abilities;
- Ongoing professional development and lifelong learning;
- Ethics;
- An understanding of clients and the environment in which the profession operates;
- Knowledge of the regulatory framework within which the profession functions.

What is the scope for teacher educators to contribute to standards setting? One hopes that policy will be supportive. The lesson that emerges strongly from the experience of the Scottish Qualification Framework (Raffe 2003) is that incrementalism, building on the past and staying close to institutional providers is crucial to successful implementation. Grounding standards setting in communities of practice is likely to provide more tightly-focused, better ‘informed’ development than would otherwise result from the work of ‘collections’ of representatives of major role players in civil society.

If standards are embedded in level descriptors, are we unduly constrained by the NQF? Ensor (2003) argues persuasively that the NQFs based on non-compulsory industrial training cannot accommodate the knowledge structures of formal education and training; this makes the framework inherently unworkable. Formal education and NQFs rest on fundamentally different assumptions about knowledge, knowing and identity. As valuable and valid as this argument is, NQFs have, by their very nature, a very broad generality. Level descriptors in NQFs are intended to serve the purpose of comparability across a wide range of qualification types, and are in any event designed primarily for ease of communication with labour markets and students. The result is that their level of generality leaves standards setting with considerable scope.

The Scottish NQF is a good example of non-constraining generality:
The levels of the SCQF are broad generic levels of outcome. Each SCQF level has a descriptor, which sets out in relatively brief generic terms, the level of outcomes associated with each level. The levels and the descriptors are designed as a national set of reference points for use by all providers and all stakeholders and against which any learning outcomes can be located. The SCQF level descriptors are published by the Joint Advisory Committee for the SCQF. They relate to all qualifications within the SCQF and therefore refer not only to qualifications of higher education institutions but also, for example, at a single level to Advanced Highers, HNCs, SVQs as well as to Certificates of Higher Education. The descriptors can, therefore, aim to provide only a general shared understanding of each level. In designing their own programmes or parts of programmes, institutions may use these generic descriptors, or they might wish to develop their own set of descriptors that reflect the particular focus of their provision (QAA: The framework for qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland).

Finally, it is necessary to add a cautionary caveat to the argument that has been made. As valuable as QA and regulatory frameworks may be in the context of standards setting for teaching education, it is unfortunately true that an unintended consequence also comes into play. Such systems with level descriptors insist on the technology of competency-based outcomes statements: ‘A key element in contemporary qualifications frameworks is the specification of outcomes’ (EHEA 2005, 63). Indeed, systems other than those that are outcomes-based are implicitly denigrated as being outdated: ‘Traditional models and methods of expressing qualification structures are giving way to systems based on explicit reference points using learning outcomes and competencies, levels and level indicators, subject benchmarks and qualification descriptors’ (EHEA 2005, 22).

As the necessary orthodoxy, outcomes-based descriptors have a rightful place in the specification of levels and standards in professional qualifications. In the context of South Africa, however, the unfortunate unintended consequence could come into play if teacher educators elide these with a scriptural approach to outcomes-based teaching. The OBE school curriculum with which teacher educators work has often been interpreted as implying that the attainment of the outcome is the thing that counts – and that how the outcome is achieved is of no consequence. Particularly in higher education, there are dangers in asserting that the processes of learning are inconsequential. Apart from offering professional qualifications, teacher educators have to engage in scholarship. And if students are to develop Bernstein’s ‘enhancement’ necessary for democratic citizenship, they need to be exposed to scholarship in the way they are taught. Good teaching and the promotion of scholarship depend on debate, critique and even conflict. This may even make the attainment of pre-specified outcomes precarious. But that is surely better than a narrow, unscholarly instrumentalism.

Allen (2006, 569) argues that:
It is the responsibility of all those involved in higher education . . . to vigorously resist the danger of the universities . . . collapsing into an integrated, uncanny hall of mirrors capable of reproducing the same student, the same degree, and the same knowledge at previously unimaginable speeds. Transparency is a force against conflict: the question remains, however, whether conflict is as pernicious in intellectual spheres as it is in the sphere of international relations.

We need to be vigilant. In many circles, it is evident that South African teacher educators have embraced OBE uncritically and scripturally as a political rather than a pedagogical project (Harley and Wedekind 2004).

CONCLUSION

This article has observed that social change has made QA, as part of regulatory architecture, a seeming inevitability. It has been argued that the best chance for QA to promote quality practice in teacher education would seem to lie in teacher educator involvement in standards setting for the variants of the professional qualifications they offer. Herein lies the potential for the realisation of ‘enhancement’ contributing to democracy.

At the same time, the danger of the regulatory architecture is that its outcomes-based technology and unintended homogenising consequences infuse the other side of the work of teacher educators – the academic side of their work. The consequences of homogenisation are well illustrated in Francis Fukuyama’s ‘End of History’ theory. This happens when the liberal democratic state becomes the universal standard form of human society. When outcomes-based approaches become the universal standard infusing the way we teach, an ‘End of Scholarship’ theory might emerge. This would entail a more insidious ‘sameness’ than the kind of ‘sameness’ characteristic of a mechanical solidarity. Scholarship would then indeed be enclosed in a mediocre, self-regulated hall of mirrors.

QA certainly has the potential to enhance quality in teacher education, and consequently to widen democracy. Whether it does so would seem to depend on whether teacher educators engage in standards setting for programme variants, and whether they create the necessary distinction between the outcomes of professional level descriptors and their academic role as scholars and teachers in higher education.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This article draws on some of the work done in the preparation of a report Standards Setting and Standards Generation in Higher Education in South Africa. This report was written for the HEQC by Ben Parker, Wieland Gevers and Ken Harley. At a more general level, we are grateful to Wayne Hugo. In thanking
colleagues for their ideas and insights, some of which have influenced this article, we need to stress that this work reflects our personal views. Views expressed here should not be attributed to any of our colleagues, or to the HEQC or SAQA.

NOTES

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the symposium ‘Higher Education Quality Assurance in South Africa widens democracy or not’ (University of Stellenbosch, 10 August 2006).
2 Available at: http://www.bologns-bergen.2005.no/.
4 Mala Singh observes that there is a trajectory towards accreditation as the hegemonic form of evaluation, with a clear move away from ‘softer, collegially managed forms of external quality assurance’ (2006, 1). There are discourses and moves towards standards and good practice guides for accreditation agencies themselves. Accrediting bodies thus become repositories of consensus.
5 A notable feature of discussion at the Stellenbosch Symposium, alluded by several participants, was that the most distinctive feature of our present situation is lack of trust.
6 They may of course establish their own ‘QA’ systems in the form of external examination and review. But these systems were initiated internally, they reported to internal audiences only, and they lacked the transparency that is now sine qua non.
7 Within teacher education, the ‘Norms and Standards for Educators’ (DoE 2000) provide a striking example of the need to ‘determine the obligation with all possible precision’ (Durkheim 1933, 75).

REFERENCES