

Postcard from South Africa

Leesa Wheelahan
Faculty of Education
Griffith University, Australia

I've just returned from attending the *African Conference on Curriculum Development in Higher Education* in South Africa sponsored by the University of South Africa, a distance education provider with more than 250,000 students. While there, I also attended some sessions of the conference on *Investment Choices for Education in Africa*, sponsored in part by the Development Bank of Southern Africa. I learnt quite a bit about the challenges facing South Africa, but also some very good examples of the way we can do things better in Australia.

The scale and scope of the issues facing South Africa are beyond our imagination in Australia. South Africa is a country of 44 million people, more than double Australia's 20 million. The poverty rate, defined by UNESCO as the percentage of the population living on less than \$2 per day, is 34%, whereas it is, of course, zero in Australia if that measure is used. Wealth is also distributed more unequally in South Africa.

According to UNESCO, the average life expectancy in South Africa is 46 years, compared to 80 years in Australia. This is in part due to the HIV/AIDS epidemic: UNESCO puts the rate of HIV among the 15-49 years age group at 15.6%. This disguises much higher rates of people living with HIV in some sections of the population and in some provinces. It also disguises the broader impact HIV has among the community, particularly for those children in families living with HIV, regardless of whether they have HIV themselves.

In his 2002 book entitled *State of Transition Post-Apartheid Educational Reform in South Africa*, Clive Harber described South Africa as a 'transition society' in which "over a short time span there occurs the more or less simultaneous collapse and reconstruction of state apparatuses, economic and social stratification systems and the central value system, especially the political value system, to offer a new vision of the future" (Harber 2002:7). He is referring to the establishment of the African National Congress-led government in 1994, which replaced the previous apartheid government, and the comprehensive program of policy reform that then commenced.

Education and training is central to South Africa's vision of itself in the future. The *purpose* of education and training is not merely to provide human capital for the labour market, but to contribute to social redress of past disadvantage and discrimination and to the social reconstruction of South Africa as a fair, democratic, inclusive and tolerant society. The commitment to social redress

is explicitly stated in the objectives of their National Qualifications Framework.

This changes the nature of educational debates. For a start, the South Africans actually have serious debates, rather than taking government policy as a given, as the case in Australia. We tend to accept the parameters of government policy rather than challenge those parameters. For example, we accept that training packages are the limits of the possible in VET, that VET is only about skills needed for work, and that higher education will inexorably become more marketised as it too (as with VET) becomes more responsive to markets and employers.

Our researchers seek a seat at the policy table (and the money that flows as a consequence), so we work within the framework of policy. We try to make VET and HE more relevant to work and our graduates more work-ready through work-integrated learning, rather than questioning the nature of work, its role in society and how it should change. Our discourse around student-centred and flexible learning is very instrumental – we look for more effective ways to teach students, but we are less likely to question what it is that we teach, unless of course, it is to make our programs more ‘relevant’ to work.

There was no outcry when Brendan Nelson as Minister for Education, Science and Training, proclaimed that too many young people aspire to go to university, and that more should instead choose TAFE. Which young people did he have in mind? The children of doctors, lawyers and politicians, or the children of tradespeople, and skilled and semi-skilled workers? This is an issue about distributional justice and access to *powerful* qualifications in Australian society that lead to powerful jobs.

This is not the case in South Africa. In a report on an evaluation of the National Qualifications Framework, Gary Granville, an Irish academic who was part of the evaluation team said that: “The stakes set by the South African project and the passions and emotions displayed both by its proponents and its critics are much higher than most equivalent discourses in other jurisdictions.” In contrasting the South African debates around qualifications frameworks to the ‘low-intensity’ debates “dominated by relatively low key technical and professional concerns” in other jurisdictions, he says that “it is the quality of mad, irrational and unreasonable fury within the NQF project that appeals.” He then cites George Bernard Shaw to explain that the reasonable person adapts themselves to the world, while the unreasonable one seeks to change it.

Even the structure of conferences in South Africa reflects the need for engaging others in debate. Most plenary sessions in the conferences I attended this year (and similarly at an RPL conference in 2003) were

structured so that there were two keynote speakers in each plenary session, and a respondent who would actually seriously debate the speakers. The outspoken dean of education at the University of Pretoria, Professor Jonathan Jansen, was a respondent at both the conferences I attended. He argued that the most important questions for a curriculum conference were 'what ideas are worth knowing' and 'how should we live in a dangerous world' rather than work-integrated learning and distance education. The latter were important, but were subsidiary questions.

Similarly the South African Qualifications Authority leads the way in promoting public debate about the National Qualifications Framework through its public lectures. In one contribution to a SAQA discussion, Professor Jansen critiques the National Qualifications Framework for promising what it could not deliver, but then asked: "Does this mean the NQF should be abolished? I think not, for what the NQF has established is a discourse of educational change among ordinary citizens; it has generated hope and optimism among those most marginalised from the education and training opportunities..."

Could we say the same for the Australian Qualifications Framework? Certainly not. Unlike SAQA, which conducts public evaluations of the NQF with great engagement from all stakeholders, reviews of the AQF (or particular qualifications within the AQF) are closed processes, with only those invited stakeholders privy to debate. This is despite the fact that the nature and type of qualifications on the AQF is a matter of public importance, and should be subject to public debate.

The challenge for South Africa is to build a broader policy, institutional and funding environment that can sustain their reform processes and realise their social objectives. The challenge for Australia is to move beyond human capital discourses as the parameters of the possible in education, and to ask Jansen's questions: "What knowledge is worth having" and "what do we need to live in a dangerous world?"

Leesa Wheelahan is a senior lecturer in the School of Vocational, Technology and Arts Education at Griffith University.

The web address for the South African Qualifications Authority is: <http://www.saqa.org.za/>. The SAQA bulletins are available from the website.