

# 10 Lifelong learning and connected-up development: insights from South Africa

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## Introduction

Lifelong learning through the four major stages of people's development (Schuller and Watson 2009) embodies the need for integrated, connected-up approaches to development. I will reference briefly three examples in action of connected-up approaches to development from South Africa which are examples of national, regional and institutional approaches to lifelong learning. They are: the National Qualifications Framework, the Learning Cape, and the University of Western Cape. I will start with highlighting the social purposes of lifelong learning and the socio-economic and political context, both of which frame the discussion.

## Lifelong learning – to what end?

For lifelong learning to be used strategically for the betterment of the human and planetary condition, it is important to remind ourselves of the key social purposes of lifelong learning. I will not rehearse all of these but will mention a couple that I find pertinent. The first is that lifelong learning:

...connects individuals and groups to the structures of social, political and economic activity in both local and global contexts, and emphasizes women and men, girls and boys, as agents of their own history in all aspects of their lives. (Adapted from: Cape Town Statement on Characteristics of Lifelong Learning Higher Education Institutions 2001)

This quote reminds us that lifelong learning is about human agency across the lifespan and in all aspects of our personal, cultural, social, political or economic lives, both locally and globally.

The second quote comes from the recent conference, CONFINTEA VI, and expands understandings of the critical relationships amongst all life forms if we are to have an environmentally sustainable and socially just future.

“The planet will not survive unless it becomes a learning planet”  
(Paul Bélanger, CONFINTEA VI, 2009)

With these aspirational social purposes in mind I turn to the South African context within which we live.

## South African context

Our histories and material conditions shape what is possible, therefore it is necessary to give brief pointers to the social, political and economic conditions within which lifelong learning is developing. South Africa is a country of 48 million people. It has the following characteristics:

- Middle-income country (USD 3,600 per capita income)
- Large proportion of young people (51% below 25)
- Life expectancy in 2007 had decreased to 50 years due to the impact of AIDS and related illnesses
- 45% live below national poverty line (USD 70 per month)
- Unemployment rate between 25% and 40%
- Great polarity between rich and poor
- Democratic constitution with strong human rights aspirations
- Strong and active civil society
- Ethnically diverse with 11 official national languages.

Lifelong learning in South Africa therefore needs to take into account a highly diverse society with both a highly developed economy amongst a certain sector and widespread poverty amongst the majority population.

## Lifelong learning and connected-up development

One of the biggest challenges of socio-economic development in any society is its ability to work across different sectors in order to achieve a more integrated approach. As society is necessarily structured to cater effectively for particular needs like health, agriculture, education or environment, institutional structures end up functioning largely in isolation from one another. Personal and community development can result in being fractured and piecemeal from the individual or communal viewpoints. Societies therefore need various mechanisms, approaches or strategies to re-connect

the different parts to achieve more integrated approaches for the good of efficient, effective personal, economic and social development. This is attempted, more or less successfully, through legislation, regulatory frameworks, cross-cutting projects and programmes or institutional structures. The philosophy and approaches to lifelong learning can potentially assist this reintegration process so that the people do have learning support from 'cradle to grave', through their different life stages. The three examples I turn to now are illustrative of these attempts in action.

### *National Qualifications Framework*

South Africa's National Qualifications Framework (NQF) is one of the first-generation NQFs in the world, and the first in a 'developing country'. One of the first education and training strategies adopted by the newly-formed democratic government in 1994 was to begin to establish the NQF to help achieve access for the previously-excluded black majority; integration and progression of learners across the education and training systems, in order to achieve redress for the past injustices. Lifelong learning was a key ambition to be built through the NQF.

Sixteen years later, with the benefit of hindsight, there is recognition that the ambitions were unrealisable. However, because qualifications are a key currency with which individuals and collectives transact their positions in society, the NQF has been a very important structure to facilitate communication, collaboration and coordination across the systems. The NQF has now entered a new phase and, amongst other things, is highlighting the importance of guidance and counselling for learners across the lifespan; recognition of prior learning; credit accumulation and transfer of credits; and research-based approaches to learning and work.

The NQF is helping build communities of trust across all parts of the education and training system nationally; it is also working closely with counterparts internationally to enable the flow of people across national borders. For lifelong learning to succeed, there must be trust amongst providers, across sectors, across national borders, to facilitate learners' successful access and progress both locally and globally. Lower and middle income countries do not have the rich institutional infrastructures of richer countries; therefore, for South Africa the NQF is playing an important developmental role. (For more information on the background and critical debate on the NQF see, for example, Lugg 2009.)

Insights from the NQF experiences include: the importance of coherent and systemic implementation; the slow nature of educational transformation; realisation that qualifications frameworks can contribute to transformation provided they are seen as a platform for communication, cooperation and coordination; guidance and counselling across the system is critical; recognition of prior learning is an important pedagogical bridge; there is need for a strong experimental scientific approach; and the strong

move to privilege outcomes-based education as a template for the whole system did not succeed.

In summary, NQFs are best understood as works-in-progress and as contestable artefacts of modern society, which can contribute in a modest way to how a society manages the relations between education, training, work and development by finding 'common ground' between distinct forms of learning and articulation with work and development practices. They are useful vehicles for communication, cooperation and coordination across education, training, work and development (Walters and Parker 2008).

### *The Learning Cape*

The second example of trying to implement lifelong learning on a provincial basis is the Learning Cape. This has not been very successful but it is important to recognise both the possibilities and limitations of creating learning regions or learning cities, as part of lifelong learning for connected-up development.

The advantage of a 'learning region' is that it demarcates a geographical space within which more holistic, integrated possibilities are created to coordinate systems, policies and practices for lifelong learning and development. For our purposes here, I will just highlight some of the lessons learnt from the Learning Cape. (For a more detailed account refer to Walters 2009.)

The creation of a learning region requires strong political will and long-term vision; it needs fundamental shifts in thinking about education, training, work and development, as it must include, for example, issues of transport, safety, the economy, health, education and training –across generations and across sectors. As we know, for example, if women are not able to get to class because of threats of violence or lack of transport, their learning will be inhibited; or if children are malnourished their abilities to concentrate and study will be limited. Therefore holistic approaches to development are required. The success of a learning region is dependent on contingent conditions which include 'communities of trust' amongst institutions, communities, and sectors. There is a constant interplay of pedagogy, politics and organisation. A learning region which is to attempt deep learning for all citizens across all ages is an extremely complex undertaking and a very challenging 'big idea'.

### *Lifelong learning in a university: University of the Western Cape*

In order for lifelong learning to move beyond rhetorical ambition, but to a systematic approach to the functioning of an institution like a university, it needs to recognise that all aspects of the institution are affected. These include: strategic partnerships and linkages; overarching regulatory frame-

works; research; teaching and learning processes; administration policies and mechanisms; student support systems and services. (UWC and UIE 2001) Lifelong learning is again concerned with connected-up development within the institution and between the institution and its surrounding communities.

The approach to lifelong learning within the university will also depend on the social purposes which are seen to underpin the lifelong learning mission. Universities are clearly not politically neutral spaces; neither is lifelong learning.

The University of Western Cape has adopted a lifelong learning mission and it has, over the last ten years or so, been systematically implementing an approach, but as with all developments of this kind, it is not uncontested. The successes have been mixed. The story of the university's attempts has also been captured elsewhere (Walters 2005).

## Key insights

In general terms, if lifelong learning is taken seriously as a philosophy and an approach it does challenge ways of seeing from points of view of individual and collective identities; there are different understandings of knowledge; and there are shifting power relations which relate to competing social and economic purposes. Therefore lifelong learning can be very challenging to people's identities, to understandings of epistemology, and power relations. There are competing social purposes; therefore there will always be contestation. This leads to the importance of national agreement on overarching policy and legislative frameworks for lifelong learning – this is something that South Africa has not yet achieved.

If the social purposes of lifelong learning are to encourage greater social justice, environmental sustainability and fairness in society, then hard choices have to be made and the politics of the endeavour need to be recognised.

I end with two quotes which signal ways of seeing the world and the purposes of lifelong learning which demand more integrated, non-hierarchical ways of understanding and approaching socio-economic, personal and planetary development.

The first comes from a woman aboriginal leader from Australia who challenges the common approach to development work where some people are deemed to know while others do not, when Lily Walker says:

“If you come here to help me, then you are wasting your time. But if you come here because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let's begin”.

And finally, from the CONFINTEA VI conference in December 2009 and in the light of the immense challenges being faced (and gradually being acknowledged) by more people and nations around the world:

“The planet will not survive unless it becomes a learning planet”.

Within these two quotes and implicit in their perspectives, lifelong learning is not an option. Working in connected-up ways within institutions, cities or nations, and then trans-nationally, is not an option if we are concerned with long-term sustainability of life on the planet.

### Reference

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