

**“All Further Education and Training Colleges (FETCs) are equal, but some are more equal than others”
(with apologies to Orwell)**

Joy Papier
(Further Education and Training Institute, University of the Western Cape)

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In preparing for this paper, it was really difficult to decide where to pitch it, since I am sure participants have widely varying experiences and understandings of developments in education and training in FET over the last 10 years, depending on their particular location within it. I wanted to pick up on the most recent debates and discourse without going into too much background detail, but I also did not want to lose half my audience by using too much jargon and assuming too much prior understanding. I have therefore opted for a ‘middle road’ which I hope is not too ‘technically’ boring, but does raise the issues vexing our progress in relation to the stated policy intentions as they have emerged over time.

My input focuses on the expectations raised in FET policy development to date, regarding youth and adult skills development within the context of local and international debates on the value and limitations of vocational education vis a vis an ‘academic’ education. While there is a need to educate for a so-called knowledge society, we have serious national imperatives for employability and work-readiness to address skills shortages and unemployment. In addition, we have a National Qualifications Framework which has specific intentions regarding transferability of credits, portability and articulation across sites of learning. Of course the question of whether more training in fact alleviates unemployment is itself open to debate.

In August 1998 Education White Paper 4: A programme for the transformation of Further Education and Training was published by the Ministry of Education, ushering in a period of tremendous excitement and trepidation for the FET sector. It spoke clearly and rationally of the urgent need for a new FET system, using language to which we would, all too soon, become accustomed. Words like responsiveness, efficiency, effectiveness, accountability, clients, stakeholders – alarmed some because of their ‘market-driven’ tone. However, the white paper also offered the hope of a ‘coordinated, comprehensive, interlocking sector that provides meaningful educational experiences (1998:3) to out of school youth, young adults and those returning to learning.

While reform of the new school curriculum was already on the cards, the white paper identified the role which new FET colleges would take up within our education system and the economy, and this was followed soon after by the FET Act and the National 3 yr strategy for FET. It is certainly fascinating to take a step back and read these base documents again, if only to see how visionary and possibly naïve we once were. I think that the time has come for sober reflection on the expectations which were raised, and some honest re-evaluation of our goals for education, training and the economy.

The last 8 years have seen fairly bold statements being made about transformation of FET colleges and their potential to address our HRD strategy and intermediate skills needs. However, a curious ambivalence about the nature and status of FET college qualifications continues to prevail, with the policies I've mentioned making fairly ambitious proclamations (e.g. qualifications giving access to work and higher education, 'institutional blindness' ... etc) while a tangle of issues regarding curriculum, approved college courses or programmes, 'different FETCs', quality assurance, articulation and equivalence remain unresolved. There is still a deafening silence about the review of the 'architecture' of the NQF and related changes in standard setting and quality assurance. What is to be done and who is to do it??

We could console ourselves of course by recognizing that systems more sophisticated than ours, more well-resourced, more mature etc, have not yet got it right – that debates around general academic, vocational, occupational qualifications, their value and status still rage - but that would be to relinquish responsibility. In preparing for this presentation it was heartening (yet depressing) to find an article which sounded so very close to home in its comment. The paper, dated Jan 2005 and written by Ann-Marie Bathmaker, an academic at the University of Sheffield in the UK, is based on a research study into how the GNVQs (General National Vocational Qualifications) in England, are being used and perceived by lecturers at a college of Further Education. It explores the changing roles and purposes of vocational education for young people in what is termed a 'knowledge society', a term commonly used in our discourse here as well. I will draw on this paper to illustrate the non-uniqueness of what we are grappling with today, and the lessons we would do well to contemplate.

Education policy in England is defined in terms of widening participation and raising achievement, which are seen as key to participation in a society where "investment in education and training is essential to increase human and social capital in order to achieve economic growth and competitiveness, social inclusion and active citizenship." This no doubt has a familiar ring to anyone who has read from our plethora of policy of the last decade. However, the GNVQs form part of a wider education and qualifications system which serves to position vocational education within a hierarchy of what counts as valuable learning. The British 'Social Exclusion Unit' (there really is a unit with this name) in 1999 stated "For this generation, and for young people in the future, staying at school or in training until 18 is no longer a luxury. It is becoming a necessity." The learning society sees learning as geared towards the achievement of credentials which are supposed to be relevant to the labour market, and which ensure inclusion in a knowledge-based learning society, and it is herein that lies the rub. New vocational qualifications were intended to meet these twin goals, yet the Working Group on Reform established by the Department for Education and Skills was asked as recently as 2004, to deal with the complaints from employers and higher education that 'young people leave education without the knowledge, skills and attributes necessary to function in the workplace or education'. Furthermore, vocational programmes were criticized as being "fragmented and confusing, only some having credibility with employers, not being perceived as worthwhile in their own right, and parents and learners being unenthusiastic about the status and quality of the learning on offer."

A statement I found fascinating, as it resonates so well with the emerging discourse around the development of vocational qualifications spearheaded by our national Department of Education, was the following:

“...in the present qualifications framework in England, vocationally related qualifications form a distinct pathway, lying between

academic and occupational qualifications...over the past decade there has been considerable academic drift, so that these qualifications now have more in common with their academic counterparts than with occupational qualifications.”

Indeed, these vocational qualifications within colleges are increasingly being perceived as ‘second chance’ learning for purposes of progression into higher education and the higher status associated with that route.

Let us for a moment consider the recently released South African FETC (Vocational) policy which shows a distinct leaning towards this position, in its composition and design. The vocational curriculum is ‘subjects’ based and the language of the school national curriculum statements for FET (the general FETC) permeates. Currently our system accommodates three kinds of FETC: the general academic – a so-called ‘whole’ qualification consisting of exit level outcomes which schools will offer and which will no doubt form the basis for university entrance criteria. Then we have the ‘vocational’ FETC gazetted in August 2005, which sets out what colleges will offer. In a nutshell, this qualification will be based on unit standards, has one compulsory language and four vocational subjects. The extent of a learner’s work readiness on completion only time can tell. At the same time, a number of industry based FETCs have been registered on the NQF in terms of SAQA’s 1998 regulations, and have been running as learnerships with no indication as to their articulation prospects with higher education.

It is no wonder that FET colleges who have been training for industry and building relationships with SETAs in terms of the skills development legislation, are worried about what their clients in the workplace might make of the new vocational qualifications to be registered by the Department of Education on the National Qualifications Framework. With a history of little or no articulation between FET colleges and Higher Education, and progression routes for vocational qualifications still unclear, it may well be that FET qualifications will again satisfy neither the demands of the workplace, or the requirements of Higher Education. A cursory glance at the public comment received on the vocational FETC, shows the concern and confusion of people in the system. Questions raised include the following:

- How do learners who have achieved some of the exit outcomes in schools, move to FET colleges – how would credits be determined?
- Does the vocational FETC equip learners to access a workplace immediately on completion?
- How do the subject based outcomes fit in with unit standard based occupational qualifications?
- Will vocational certificates at Levels 2 and 3 be registered on the NQF – what is their status?
- What will happen to the N4 to N6 qualifications which are part of the Report 191 (college qualifications list) which will be phased out?
- The school leaving qualification is to be called the National Certificate but colleges will get a vocational FETC – will the academic national certificate not continue to enjoy the higher status and priority among parents and learners? How do these two qualifications begin to compare?
- Will the old access blockages not just recur if the vocational FETC at Level 4 and the national certificate at level 4/Gr 12 mean very different things?
- Is there a need for new vocational qualifications given the numbers of FETCs in similar fields/occupations registered on the NQF already?

Ball (1999) points out that young people (in vocational programmes) “are aware that they have lower status in the hierarchy of ‘student worth’”, but other researchers have found that despite this there is the optimism that, “...for some of them, at least, vocationally-related education holds out the hope that they can re-open doors by succeeding via this alternative route.” (Wolf, 2002).

One of the most depressing conclusions made about vocational education in a ‘knowledge society’ must be the following:

“Although vocational qualifications are supposed to help respond to such demands (broad knowledge, transferable skills, specific training), and despite a mantra-like reiteration of parity of esteem between academic and vocational qualifications throughout the 1990s, the working group acknowledges that all qualification outcomes are not valued equally, and their report speaks of the ‘uncertain currency of some qualifications’” (Bathmaker 2005:97).

Where does this leave our fragile and evolving system of stratified FET qualifications? Is attainment of the so-called ‘general academic’ FETC to remain the holy grail of FET learners in spite of the inability of higher education to accommodate all its applicants? What options can we honestly and unequivocally offer our learners, in particular our youth?

I want to turn to some of the senior certificate statistics released at the end of December 2005 by the Department of Education (www.education.gov.za). These are rather scary: about ½ million learners wrote the final exams (508 363). Of these, 347 184 or 68,3% passed. Of the successful candidates, 86 531 passed with university entrance or endorsement. That leaves us with 161 179 who do not have a school leaving certificate, and 260 653 who do not have university entrance for degree programmes. Add to this the number of youth who have dropped out along the way between Grade 8 and Grade 12 and the prediction that only half of the successful senior certificate candidates will find jobs, and it is easy to see why there may shortly be many groups of youth on street corners idling away their time and getting into trouble.

Of course a substantial number may access higher education through alternative routes and into courses which do not require endorsement, others may return to adult learning centres or those better off to private facilities to try and re-write Grade 12. But what are the options for others who desperately need access to work and learning? Without any state financial aid scheme for FET college learners, FET qualifications and the prospect of some workplace preparation will remain out of reach for impoverished learners. An immediate barrier confronting access to an alternative route is simply finance – in spite of bold statements made in the National Strategy of 1999-2001 regarding programme funding and student financial aid.

Year after year we fail our learners, not only in the classrooms but when they leave schools in the hope of earning a living the system fails them by offering little viable options for work or learning or both. Learning is either too expensive or too irrelevant and formal employment scarce. Vocational qualifications need to become desirable because they offer real learning and real skills, inspire confidence among employers, are affordable by the masses who need training, and because the learning pathway is clearly signposted. This is what the policy has promised, but it seems we are still a long way off from achieving it.

I want to make an earnest appeal for an appraisal of the mismatch between policy and reality. No doubt the euphoria of our democratic transition resulted in an unbridled idealism where everything was possible if we only believed and worked hard to achieve it. I want to suggest that many of us have been believers (at times we've been called zealots), and have worked hard to achieve those ideals, but with increasing frustration has come fatigue and cynicism. So much so that I have been driven to wonder whether White Paper 4 should not be revisited given our new-found insights into what is possible in FET and what is not – or do we continue to hold out promises and suggestions which can never be fulfilled because it's just too hard, too exhausting, too contentious. We need to examine the reasons for systems lethargy and take decisive action if we are to retain the many positive and visible signs of change in the FET sector.

If we don't address the current problems, I worry that the extremely hard work which thousands of people have invested in building a new system, will be undermined. Here I want to mention the positives – lest it all seem like doom and gloom. There can be no doubt that successive policy initiatives have stimulated debate in education and training like never before. The buy-in and support for the National Qualifications Framework, as evidenced by the recent impact study, is overwhelming.

Industry and labour are making an input into curriculum for training and there is a renewed energy in the FET colleges. National treasury is recapitalizing colleges to the tune of 1.5billion and a flurry of planning is under way. Outmoded college facilities and infrastructure will be over-hauled through this capital injection and college programmes are in the process of being reviewed. Opportunities for entrants to learning and work have gained momentum through learnerships and skills programmes. People have been given new hope where previously there was little. It would be impossible to ignore the enormous goodwill generated, but we must not take this for granted. The deep and abiding questions of curriculum, purpose, systems coherence, funding and so on which I have referred to have to be taken seriously, and soon. We cannot continue to perpetuate old rhetoric while the status quo remains unchanged. If the perceptions of the public regarding the status of vocational and workplace education are to be challenged, we need to communicate clearly and decisively what such qualifications can do and what they cannot, their purpose and their pathways.