

# NATIONAL SKILLS CONFERENCE – 16 OCTOBER 2008

## Sub Theme 3: Quality and relevance of skills interventions to meet technological and future demands.

### **Stella Carthy: Presentation**

Business supports the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) and is committed to ensuring the successful establishment of the QCTO so that effective quality assurance in terms of training delivery and assessment can happen. Business is supportive of many of the ideas, concepts and statements that are evident in emerging policy, discussion and explanatory documents which are currently in circulation such as:

- An approach where Quality Assurance permeates all activities
- Fit for purpose occupational qualifications
- Less bureaucratic (than current system)
- Better co-ordination and management of quality assurance activities
- Simplifying the accreditation process
- Foundational learning competence
- Focus on workplace learning and experience

One of the advantages that the QCTO has in 2008/09 and which bodes well for its future, is that, as the Minister mentioned yesterday, the skills development landscape has already been reformed. The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) laid many of the foundations in terms of qualification design, unit standards, a National Qualification Framework, outcome based training, quality assurance as well as acronyms e.g. ETQA, NSB, SGB etc. Good foundations are there to be built upon by the QCTO. We need to ensure that we do learn from the last 12 years and take that which is good rather than discard it.

A new approach of the QCTO is that quality assurance should permeate all activities and not be a separate function. The overall quality assurance system for the QCTO focuses most resources on quality of qualification design and the validity of learner achievements. The idea is to have a strong and rigorous upfront system so that less policing and self monitoring, especially by providers with a good track record, is practiced.

While business supports this in principle, it is agreed that the QCTO does need to set standardized, national criteria for all quality assurance QCTO providers for elements such as accreditation criteria, registration of assessors, moderators and external assessment conditions. To have these criteria specified in the qualification design and its related curriculum has the possibility to lead to many different standards for quality assurance. Does this imply that a training centre delivering training towards many occupational awards across a number of disciplines will have to comply with as many different accreditation criteria, criteria for registration of assessors etc. It will be very difficult for training centers to comply, even if they have a good track record and therefore qualify for self monitoring, to meet a variety of criteria for different occupational awards. Granted, quality assurance criteria being a feature of qualifications may well bring about consistency within the qualification but will it be consistently good quality through the entire delivery system. We should expect that there is consistently good quality assurance across all occupational awards all the time. Therefore for a strong and rigorous upfront quality assurance system, criteria for quality assurance elements need to be pulled out and made explicit by the QCTO to be applied by all accredited training centres and in all qualifications. This may be seen as a specific function – so be it. The challenge then is to ensure that it permeates across all activities.

I am not suggesting that quality assurance criteria that are specific to a discipline or qualification are tossed out – they may indeed be described in the qualification design and related curriculum and become a quality assurance requirement in addition to those required by the QCTO as a minimum.

Just a word on current Quality Assurance practices where often a tick box approach is used, especially in the case of quality assurance policies and procedures as a requirement for accreditation. Policies and procedures for quality assurance are not necessarily a bad thing to be thrown out. They do become a bad thing however, when they become an end instead of a means to an end. In other words don't show me a policy that has been drawn up by a consultant lying in a file and dusted off for an accreditation or verification visit by an ETQA. Rather let me see the policy or procedure in action when you show me learners being taught and learning being assessed according to the policy. Instead of showing me the required 10% moderation, show me what has been implemented to improve quality as a result of lessons being learnt by conducting moderation. This is one area where the QCTO may consider not throwing the baby out with the bath water. If the potential for having a basis for a strong and rigorous upfront quality assurance system is there, perhaps build on it and at best make it work or at least, less bad.

The notion of workplace experience and learning is supported. In industries where apprenticeships are common and in professions where internships or articles are a requirement for professional registration, workplaces have a culture for and accommodate learners in the workplace following a structured learning programme. Outside of this there are not many employers who offer on the job learning and there is not a culture for such as we find in Germany for example. For QCTO occupational awards and skills certificates to be successfully implemented a lot of thought in terms of how to change the culture of workplaces to be open to offering workplace learning needs attention, careful thought and planning will be required and the NIKE philosophy of "just do it" won't work. If workplace experience is poorly implemented a window opportunity will be lost.

Where workplace experience is one of the features of current qualifications, it is usually acknowledged that the theory and or knowledge component and the practical skills component is well done and generally the learning institutions are pretty good in these areas. However this is not always the case with workplace experience. Whether a workplace has tossed out the log book approach and has graduated to using on the job modules, the supervisors/managers have to be relied upon and their focus is on production and health and safety before being worried about a learner and on the job training modules. I am not suggesting it can't be done, but a lot of thought and changes in workplaces are required before workplace experience will have any chance of success.

Having external summative assessments is a feature that can ensure quality. Most of us could probably paint a picture of external assessments for artisans and professions such as legal, accounting and medical where such exists or has existed in the past. Therefore there are models in SA for external assessments. But a problem arises when there is no professional or other such body to perform the external assessment function within a specific area. Secondly drawing up, conducting and maintaining external assessments requires considerable expertise, capacity and money. Thirdly external assessments, if they go awry, as they can and do with the matriculation exams, compromises the quality of the assessments and the currency of the occupational award will be lost. Lastly drawing up assessments is a very specialized area requiring expertise as is acknowledged in the assessment expertise that will be provided by the QCTO to professional bodies. This expertise will have to be developed very quickly to ensure success. Business would like to see a lot more meat being added to the skeleton of external assessments currently in the policy documents.

Funding is an area that has received very little attention. Although it is an essential element for making the QCTO work, I shan't dwell on it for long. But who will fund CEP's, external assessments, the FLC, the QCTO, SAQA.

RPL and Critical Cross Fields Outcomes (CCFO) are mentioned in the QCTO document. We know that neither RPL nor CCFO have been too successful in the current system. Very little attention is paid to them. If they are to be a feature of the QCTO then we need to get them to work properly. I don't want to dwell on them but we need to be sure for example how CCFO are going to be addressed. Are they going to be taught separately or intergrated into the technical training.

I now want to turn to the FLC. Business supports the FLC. We know that in the current workplace, especially in labour intensive industries, communication and mathematical literacy is much needed and the FLC can go a long way in giving these basic competencies to many people so that the quality of work and home life can be enhanced. We know that for many reasons that I am not going to go into the fundamental unit standards were not successful. The QCTO needs to ensure that the FLC does work.

Lastly a word on relevance of skills interventions. I think the SDA has been very ambitious but correct to make provision for skills planning mainly through Workplace Skills Plans, Sector Skills Plans and research conducted by the DoL. Through such mechanisms, the possibility of identifying areas where skills development elements are required to maintain and support the economy, so that the country does not have scarce skills or at least not for a prolonged period, is laid out. Although the WSPs have had their own problems, it is only now, that in some sectors the WSPs are starting to bear fruit and are able to meaningfully contribute to real skills planning. It will be a pity to change the course of the WSP in the near future and loose the value they can add to skills planning and relevance of skills interventions.