**'Stacked qualifications': The case for a 'working class highway' to intermediate and high level skills**

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**Introduction**

This paper begins by outlining the scale of the problem of young people who exit the schooling system early or who exit with so modest a matriculation certificate that progression is difficult, or who drop out of post-school study, or who simply need a job to survive. These people are too often assigned to a lifetime 'at the bottom' of society, becoming workers with few progression possibilities or simply unemployed. It proceeds to consider the pre-2009 policy responses of the Departments of Education and Labour to this and whilst commendable, the paper argues that these are incomplete for reasons that are elaborated. These solutions are then juxtaposed to the strategies that were used to address similar problems in South Africa in the post-depression years. The paper concedes that these strategies were implemented in vastly different times nevertheless the paper ends with the question: should these strategies not be revisited today, with appropriate modification and updating? It is argued that the establishment of the new Department of Higher Education and Training creates the context for doing so, and that the product would be consistent with government's commitment to creating an inclusive growth path.

**Mind the Gap? What if the 'Gap' is just too wide to navigate?**

The picture drawn by Cloete and Sheppard (2010) depicts just how wide the gap between school and post-school learning is for the majority of 18 to 24 year olds in South Africa. Only 9.4 per cent of this group were, in 2007, studying at a public college (4.0%) or at a university (5.4%), whilst 24.5% were still at school – with all considered only 35.3% in any kind of educational institution. Where were the remaining 65%? Reportedly one in five (21.3%) of the age cohort were employed, and one in four (26.9%) were officially unemployed – with the remainder being discouraged, not in employment, education or training – the so-called NEET group. Cloete and Sheppard (2010) report that the latter group consisted, in 2007, of 2.8 million individuals, two million of whom had less than a matriculation certificate (with one million having at least a Grade 10 but less than a Grade 12). Many other commentators (such as Altman 2009, 2010) have underlined the scale and urgency of the problem.

The problem is clearly compounded by the economy's incapacity to generate sufficient low-level jobs into which these young people can be absorbed. Even COSATU has argued; in it's recently released discussion document '*A Growth Path towards Full Employment'* that "the growth path must, in its initial stages, be low skill intensive in order to combat the scourge of structural unemployment" although they go on to qualify this point by arguing that widespread opportunities for 'learning-by-doing' should be available (COSATU: 2010:6.4:38). Indeed all agree that education and training is a vital part of the solution, albeit that on its own it will be insufficient.

The problem of youth unemployment is perversely accompanied by pervasive skills shortages which retard both investment and development. This reality prompted the Presidency, in March 2006, to initiate the Joint Initiative on Priority Skills Acquisition (JIPSA) (Presidency, 2010)[1]. A range of initiatives were initiated at the time, with some success (ibid: 20-43), however shortages have persisted.

In the next section the responses of the Departments of Education and Labour to these problems prior to 2009 are considered.

**Solutions from 'the divided time'**

Prior to 2009, in the 'divided time', the Departments of Education (DOE) and Labour (DOL), formulated separate solutions to these problems – each working with the dominant logics of their own communities and jettisoning that over which they had little control.

*The Department of Education*

[1] JIPSA identified 'priority skills' in five areas as being in critically short supply: engineering and planning for both the 'network industries' as well as for city, urban and regional planning; artisanal and technical skills for infrastructure development, housing and energy *inter alia*; management and planning skills in education and health and finally mathematics, and science and language in public schooling (Presidency 2010: 18).

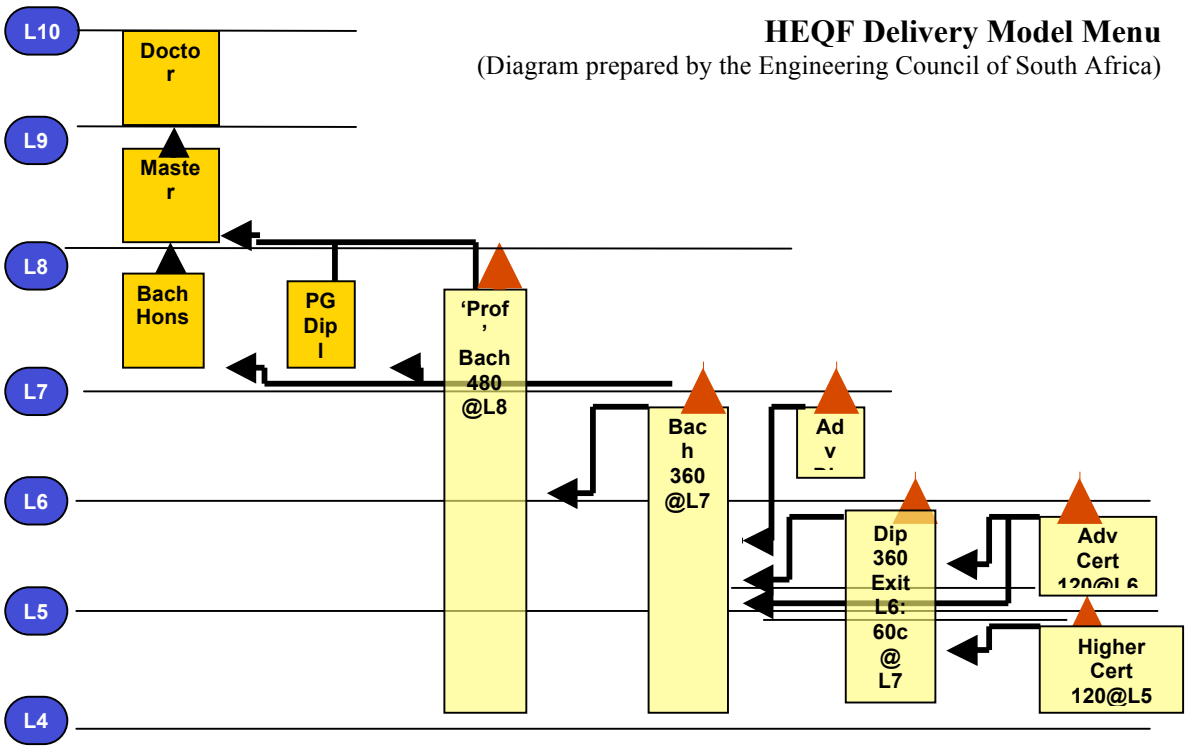
After managing the merger of institutions of higher education to address the racial inequalities of the past, in 2007 the DoE formulated two key interventions in the post-school environment: it introduced the National Certificate (Vocational) (NCV) and the Higher Education Qualification Framework (HEQF).

The NC(V) was introduced to replace the National Technical Education (NATED) programmes – or 'N' courses – which had historically formed an integral part of the apprenticeship system, but which had, since the 1980s, become largely stand alone courses without a clear purpose. Subsequent research has confirmed this view. Umalusi (2010, Table 3) found the conceptual demand placed on N3 learners to be lower than both the standard grade as well as the higher grade matriculation courses to which it was held to be notionally equivalent. Kraak (2008:493) found that 69.7 per cent of African 'N' graduates remained unemployed after college graduation. And Gewer (2010:5) found this outcome to be largely due to the absence of work experience during study – with those having some work experience during or after their studies at college being 82% more likely to find a job appropriate to their qualification than those with no experience. However, in the 'divided time' the difficulty of securing work experience for students was so great (and the capacity to give inducements to employers to provide this work experience fell to DoL) that the DOE decided to do away with work experience as a requirement altogether. Instead the NCV seeks to give learners a broad foundation in one of fourteen vocational fields which is intended to provide a foundation for work in a range of related areas: for example, the National Certificate (Electrical Infrastructure Construction) prepares youngsters for work at a power station, an energy producing company, a telecommunications company, a recording studio or a theatre (DoE, 2008:16). There have however been various challenges experienced with the implementation of the programme as well as concerns about its purpose and 'the level of throughput and the high numbers that appear to be exiting the qualification prior to completion as well as the large numbers that are repeating subjects' (DHET, 2010). As a result the College Summit, held on 3rd and 4th September 2010, resolved to initiate a review of the programme. The Summit also agreed to expand the menu of programmes at colleges to include both the NCV as well as 'occupational programmes' (discussed further below) in future.

The HEQF was introduced in 2007 and has been usefully summarised by the Engineering Council of South Africa in the following diagram:

**HEQF Delivery Model Menu**

(Diagram prepared by the Engineering Council of South Africa)




The framework provides essentially three entry points into higher education and training: a higher certificate, a diploma or a degree. In the diagram above these qualifications are drawn side-by-side as they are essentially alternatives. Progression from one to the other is governed by the 50% rule. This rule states that 'a maximum of 50% credits of a completed qualification may be transferred to another qualification, provided also that no more than 50% of the credits required for the other qualification are credits that have been used for a completed qualification." (GN 928, GG NO.30353, 5 October 2007, p. 9). Different entry requirements have been set for degrees, diplomas and certificates (DoE, GN 928, GG 30353, 5 October 2007, p.14) – with the bar set highest for degree programmes, slightly lower for diplomas, and lower yet for certificates. These rules are premised on the notion that schools work and adequately sort learners into ability groups signalled by their school leaving scores.

Those with higher scores are permitted to enter the higher qualification programmes as it is assumed they as they have mastered the conceptual work of the school curriculum and hence are more likely to cope with the deeper and broader study at degree level. Those on the next rung down are 'able' to manage the diploma curriculum, with the third group directed to undertake a certificate course. As the entry level knowledge requirement rises across the three programmes, affording learners credit when they move from the one to the next is difficult. The system assumes that learners lack the foundation of the next level up and so frequently requires them to return to the first year of the next programme to fill their 'conceptual gaps'. These 'gaps' constitute what can be called a 'theory threshold'. It follows that it is uncommon for learners to progress from a certificate to a diploma or from a diploma to a degree. The HEQF is therefore essentially a framework of "parallel pathways". The funding framework mirrors this assumption, with learners who have completed one programme not qualifying for a second tranch of public support. The construction of this 'parallel pathway' framework has been heavily influenced by the logic of the 'hard' sciences where the sequence in which curricular components are presented, matters greatly - '(l)ater elements depend upon earlier elements first being grasped' (Muller, 2008a:21)

Those that fail to meet the entry requirements set, or fail to gain access to oversubscribed institutions, are assumed to be (or are at least treated as) the 'less able', for all that they may well not be so but may rather be the victims of poverty and circumstance. Nevertheless they must find employment directly from school, and commence learning on-the- job – where the work they are assumed 'able' to do is of a more humble and routine nature and where their access to the powerful knowledge bases required for progression are effectively closed.

Such is the confidence that is placed on the original sorting of ability at schools (first or second time around), that the *system* currently offers few bridges between the pathways. This reality contributes to the creation and maintenance of a highly stratified and unequal labour market and in turn helps re-create our inequitable society.

The HEQF system is also premised on the assumption that learning is predominantly institution-based and full-time (except for distance learning programmes). Theoretically it does permit the inclusion of embedded workplace learning, or what in the university sector is known as 'work integrated learning' (WIL), however, by stating that '(i)t is the responsibility of institutions, which offer programmes requiring WIL credits to place students into WIL programmes' (DoE, GN 928, 5 October 2007), it places extreme pressure on institutions to find such placements[2]. Institutions fear they may fail in all cases and so are increasingly nervous about including this component. And again, without the levers to incentivize employers to take on learners for workplace learning residing with the DoL, the HEQF prioritises institution-based learning. This is consistent with Bernstein's observation that historically 'manual practice was never integrated into formal public systems of knowledge and transmission. Manual practice was relayed through the family and guild' (2000:8 quoted by Gamble 2004:59). Gamble continues to quote Bernstein to elaborate the point: 'That is, it was invisible to education and invisible to those who operated a mental practice. It is probably for this reason that, whereas we know something about the transmission and acquisition of mental practices, we know very little about the transmission and acquisition of manual practices. For the latter is not part of the consciousness entailed in the formation of mental practices, or if it is, it is not likely to be formed by education (1990:147 quoted by Gamble 2004:59)'. The work experience requirements set and assessed by the professions, which generally follow the completion of HEQF qualifications, is hence more 'guild-like' and generally fall outside of the HEQF.

*The Department of Labour*

The DoL, by contrast, did not produce an equivalent qualification framework. Instead it produced a qualification 'holding frame' called a 'learnership' into which sectoral occupational needs were injected. The purpose of these qualifications was to meet workplace needs:

(a) to develop the skills of the South African workforce –
    (i) to improve the quality of life of workers, their prospects of work and labour mobility;
    (ii) to improve productivity in the workplace and the competitiveness of employers;
    (iii) to promote self-employment; and
    (iv) to improve the delivery of social services;
(b) to increase the levels of investment in education and training in the labour market and to improve the return on that investment;
(c) to encourage employers –
    (i) to use the workplace as an active learning environment;
    (ii) to provide employees with the opportunities to acquire new skills;

[2] The South African Technology Network, the organisation of Vice-chancellors of the Universities of Technology secured legal opinion on this point and it was confirmed that indeed they have a legal obligation to guarantee work placement for students. Failure to do so might open them to litigation from parents or guardians.

(iii) to provide opportunities for new entrants to the labour market to gain work experience; and
(iv) to employ persons who find it difficult to be employed;

(d) to encourage workers to participate in learning programmes;
(e) to improve the employment prospects of persons preiously disadvantaged by unfair discrimination and to redress those disadvantages through training and education.
(f) To ensure the quality of learning in and for the workplace; (Skills Development Act, 1998, Section 2)

In the Act learnerships are legislatively defined to be learning programmes requiring both 'structured learning' as well as work experience – and leading to a qualification registered on the National Qualification Framework (SDA, 1998, section 16). However nowhere is the term 'structured learning' defined. Instead this component was defined by the industrial Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) against industry-set purposes. This led educational theorists to declare that they were utterly devoid of discipline knowledge. For instance, Muller derided these qualifications in the following manner:

> An entire institutional maze of Sectoral Education and Training authorities (SETAs) has been established to 'pedagogise' what is essentially contextually tacit procedural knowledge. The assumption here is that it is possible to drive conceptuality pedagogically. This assumption is mistaken. Conceptuality is driven by conceptual innovation in the knowledge structure itself, in the field of knowledge production' it cannot be 'recontextually' driven in the curriculum, in the field of knowledge production, without producing perverse effects. These perverse effects are everywhere apparent in the distressing shambles of the SETAs and the depressing proliferation of virtual knowledge fields like hairdressing. (Muller, 2008a:27).

This derision cannot detract from two important achievements of the learnership system: the HSRC found (2008) that 57 per cent of previously unemployed learners found work after completion; and many workers gained opportunities for credentialed study, from which they had historically been denied access. For those whom the post-school system offered very little, these represented important achievements.

However the same study (HSRC, 2008, Figure 15) did find that the majority (78%) of learners undertook programmes on NQF levels 1 (11%), 2 (22%), 3 (14%) or 4 (31%)[3] – where the required disciplinary knowledge was presumably shallow. And a Chemical SETA (CHIETA, 2010) study found that learnerships leading to trade qualifications were frequently 'thin' on theory, leading to poor performance on the trade test:

> "For the majority of the CHIETA learnership qualifications, the learner will have to complete additional modules to close the gaps identified. The results show that learners who have completed NQF levels 2, 3 and 4 learnership qualifications are finding it substantially more difficult to successfully complete the Pre-Trade Test Theoretical Assessment." "This may be attributed to the lack of emphasis being placed on the theoretical requirements by the training providers, who historically have only had to concentrate on the practical elements." (CHIETA, 2008).

This was not true for all SETAs. For instance the Mining Qualifications Authority continued to use the traditional 'N' courses as an integral component of apprenticeship training and their learners did not face the same problems (Prinsloo, 2010). However, the CHIETA problem is not an isolated one as the failure of learnership candidates to pass their trade test first time was reported to the Human Resources Development Council as a common problem.

The problem may well be attributable to the fact that South Africa was heavily influenced by Australia in the design and development of its skills development agenda (see Bird, forthcoming), and this model, the Australian researcher Wheelahan has argued, has perversely blocked rather than facilitated worker learning and progression at work: '(C)ompetency-based training in vocational education and training in Australia is one mechanism through which the working class is denied access to powerful knowledge represented by the academic disciplines.' (Wheelahan, 2007: 637)

There is therefore another 'theory threshold' between learnerships and other more skilled occupational learning routes – one which Wheelahan argues can only be filled by providing VET learners with complimentary discipline-based knowledge:

> A social justice strategy in Australia must not be premised solely on increasing access to higher education for working-class students, although this is important. It must also be premised on overturning CBT as the

[3] Only a residual 7% undertook programmes on level 5. The 11% on NQF level 7 were accounting students whose WIL component was successfully translated into a learnership by the Financial Services SETA (FASSET) to afford accounting employers the advantage of both skills levy grants and tax breaks.

> mandated model of curriculum for all VET qualifications, and emphasising once again the importance of disciplinary knowledge as a component of VET qualifications. Electricians need to think like mathematicians, and community development workers like sociologists. We need to value the depth and complexity of knowledge needed for vocational practice the same as we do for professional practice.

The DoL came to a somewhat similar conclusion and proposed to address the problem through the introduction of a new quality council, the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) to streamline and organise these learnerships into more formal occupational qualifications – each with a formal 'knowledge component' as well as practical and work experience components. However, in 2008 when the Skills Development Act was amended, again no definition was provided for the 'knowledge' component – so the historical danger of 'thin theory' qualifications persists.

What is the solution? Muller concedes that 'the purpose of the qualification is paramount, and must be clearly established from the outset. The question is not; 'Should they not be the same since they are all (for example) Engineering?' Rather it is: 'What kind of graduate should this qualification produce?' (2008a: 32). However, when he goes on to assert that '(w)hile it is true that there are hundreds of occupations for which we prepare graduates, it is also true that there are only four modal qualifications routes' and then proceeds to cluster the NC(V) and HEQF options into four streams directed toward four destinations: particular occupations; general occupations; professionals and research based work, with the first of the four linked to college programmes, and the latter three being drawn from the HEQF. His are not the only alternatives that have been put forward for policy consideration. Cosser (2010a and b) has formulated a different variant of these options. However in general they are all based on 'parallel pathway' logic. The question is: is this logic all that we have to choose from? Our own history suggests otherwise, as discussed in the next section.

**A working class highway alternative?**

That apartheid was a 'crime against humanity' is not openly contested today. As a consequence, the view that embedded within its bowels, or in the bowels of its precursor, might have been ideas that could be useful today is not often advocated – although it has happened as is evidenced, for example, by the work of Abedian and Standish (1985) whose research into 'Poor White Relief programmes' helped inform the design and development of the Expanded Public Works Programmes. A similar investigation is adopted below.

The Great Depression of 1929 compounded the poverty that was already widespread in the country amongst both black and white people. The poverty amongst black people was the result of ruthless colonial conquests, land seizures and racist labour and residential laws. The poverty amongst a layer of white people was the result of different forces. Many had recently left the rural areas and migrated to town due to the commercialisation of farming, triggered by the discovery of gold and an influx of prospectors, as well as the inheritance practices that operated at the time (which divided a family's land equally amongst the sons of the owner, resulting in plots becoming unviably small). These poor, recently rural white folk were not initially employed to do labouring jobs as their labour was more expensive than their black counterparts, so they were largely unemployed. There were, relatively speaking, large numbers of them and collectively their plight was known as the 'Poor White Problem' – which politicians of the day were eager to address in order to maintain power (because these folk had the vote, and had, together with the white trade unions in 1922, shown considerable militancy).

After the worst of the Great Depression was over, in 1932, the politicians decided that the best remedy was economic growth. And as an initial step, they decided to come off what was then known as the Gold Standard - the internationally set standard gold price – and to permit South African gold to be sold on the open market. The result was a dramatic increase in the price of gold and a consequential increase in tax revenue to government. This created the resource base for a number of major industrial projects – such as the establishment of South Africa's first major steel works (ISCOR) and a massive expansion of its electricity grid and telecommunication infrastructure. The execution of these projects demanded a skills base larger than any the country could at the time deliver however there was a rising nationalism that opposed simple recruitment of the required skills from aboard. So an alternative strategy was devised, which is outlined below.

Young white working class boys (no women) were taken on as apprentices in large numbers by the parastatals (which were driving the industrial projects listed above). Most of these boys had only the equivalent of Grade 9 education, although some had completed a trade school 'preliminary technical certificate' at levels 1 and 2 prior to being indentured[4]. The apprenticeships they entered were five-years long. During the apprenticeship employers were required to release apprentices to study at the technical colleges (at first it was night classes,

[4] There was also a route for people engaged on relief projects to enter these apprenticeships (after designated periods of time etc.)

later on a day a week and later still on a three month block release basis). The courses they studied were the National Technical Certificate courses (NTC or 'N' for short) set by the Education Department in collaboration with the relevant parastatals. In the main apprentices were required to complete their N2 to qualify as artisans (although sometimes N1 plus N2 trade theory was sufficient). However, those apprentices who wished to continue studying were encouraged to do so even during their apprenticeships. After completing their N2's they could advance to N3, and thereafter take what was known at the time as the Advanced Technical Certificates I and II (ATC I and II) – all on a part-time basis.

In the electrical and telecommunication field under the Post Office, the subjects which apprentices followed are shown below:

N.T.C. 1. Mathematics 1; Physics 1; Engineering Drawing 1 or Telephone and Telegraph Drawing;
N.T.C. 2 Mathematics 2; Telephony and Telegraphy 1; Lines 1; Electrotechnics 1;
N.T.C. 3 Mathematics 3; Telephony 2; Telegraphy 2; Radio-Communication 1;
A.T.C. 1 Mathematics 4; * Telephony 3; * Telegraphy 3 or Radio-communication 2*; Transmission 1;
A.T.C. 2 * Mathematics 5 * Telephony 4 * Lines 2 or Radio-Communication 3 * Transmission 2 (Johnson, 1940, 288)

The subjects with asterisks (*) were those that people who wished to sit for the Assistant Engineer's Competitive Examination had to pass (see below). "The department decides what subjects the boys should be taught, the curriculum and syllabuses are framed in collaboration between the Post Office and the Union Department of Education.' (Johnson, 1940, 269/285).

These subjects included structured, recognised components of disciplinary knowledge, they were not, using Muller's words, simply contextually tacit procedural knowledge. The model therefore satisfies Wheelahan's requirement that disciplinary knowledge should be taught to the working class. However the curricular *design* was different to that followed in the parallel pathway. The introductory, lower level programmes were not premised on a broad, well established foundation of school-based mathematics and science. The programmes were specifically taylored to the purpose of the trade. They were therefore, from the perspective of the 'academy', 'narrow and shallow'. However, subsequent programmes in the sequence incrementally added depth and breadth as dictated by the need of the next occupation milestone in the sequence. Furthermore, the theoretical work was carefully aligned to the practical learning, and vice versa. Johnson gives the following outline of the practical programme that Telegraph and Telephone Electrician apprentices followed. The table shows how the learning time doubled between 1913 and 1935 as the system grew in complexity as new technology was introduced (see rise from 4 to 14 months for switchboards for instance, which reflects the introduction of automatic exchanges which replaced earlier manual ones).

| Subject. | Time in months | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1913 | 1918 | 1923 | 1930 | 1935 |
| Aerial Line Construction (Town) | 6 | 6 | 12 | 8 | 6 |
| Aerial Cable Construction | 2 | 3 | 4 | 6 | - |
| Underground Cables | 2 | 3 | | | 6 |
| Fitting | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| Mechanicians' Shop | 4 | 4 | 8 | 8 | 6 |
| Faults | 4 | 7 | 10 | 6 | 6 |
| Switchboard Construction and Maintenance | 4 | 4 | 6 | 10 | 14 |
| Telegraph Maintenance (From 1926 incl. Secondary Cells) | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 |
| Records and Clerical Work | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| Test Clerks | - | - | 4 | 4 | 3 |
| Aerial Line Construction (Country | - | - | 6 | 6 | 6 |
| Outstation Experience | - | - | - | 2 | 3 |
| Motor Transport | - | - | - | - | 1 |
| | 30 | 36 | 60 | 60 | 60 |

Source: Table II, Johnson, 1940, 268.

A significant sub-set of apprentices followed this route – and were rewarded when they passed with higher pay and often promotion. Those who completed their ATC II certificates and wished to progress even further were given special courses which led to a government-set examination, and if they passed that, they could proceed to the ranks of 'engineer'. Reports show that a large proportion of the engineers in the offices of the parastatals at the time came up this route – and it therefore contributed to the work getting done and the skills shortages being addressed. In 1940, for example, Mr. C. Griffith, then Chief Engineer in the Post Office, when giving the vote of thanks after Johnson's paper, made the following comment:

> It is worthy of note that in the ranks of assistant engineer and upwards, 50% of the grade 3 engineers (the lowest grade of engineer) came from the electricians' grade …, 30 per cent in the senior assistant engineer's grade and 30 per cent from the assistant engineer's grade. You may perhaps think that the percentages show a falling-off in the standard attained by the electricians and mechanicians, but that is not the case. It is due to a combination of circumstances and the fact that we have expanded very rapidly during the last seven years. For instance, in 1933, the number of engineers and assistant engineers embraced in the higher professional division was 60; to-day [1940] it is 93. Including replacements due to retirements and death no fewer than 52 officers were appointed to the grade of assistant engineer during this period. (Johnson, 1940:294)

By comparison over the same period there had been 15 university graduates who had passed the Competitive Examination and been 'welcomed' into the Department (Johnson, 1940,295).

In the mechanical engineering section Johnson himself observed that:

> Out of eleven engineers in the Chief Engineer's office at the present time, four began their careers in the mechanicians' workshops (Johnson, 1940, 289)

The Post Office was not an exception, as John Orr noted in 1932:

> In the great majority of cases, those aspiring to become mechanical and electrical engineers have to reach that goal through an ordinary apprenticeship and continuation technical classes, with or without the advantage of a preliminary day technical or trades school training. (Orr, 1932, 113)

> The great majority of those holding important positions in the engineering world have not had the advantage of such [university – AB] training. In spite of many drawbacks and early lack of opportunity, they have overcome the difficulties that confronted them and reached high positions in the engineering profession, as is fully demonstrated by reference to many members of this Institute [the South African Institute of Electrical Engineers - AB]. (Orr, 1932, 112).

In addition to providing a model for the incremental attainment of relevant disciplinary knowledge, albeit in a more narrowly constructed curriculum, there are a number of important features of this system that warrant highlighting here and stand in sharp contrast to the 'parallel pathway' outlined above:

- The programmes were all part-time and all learners worked whilst studying, therefore earning an income (which was necessary as many of the boys came from homes where their parents were unemployed);
- The workplace learning component (linked to their apprenticeships) was also highly structured and aligned to their college studies.
- The programmes were sequential – the completion of one led to the next (there was no 50% rule as currently applies in the HEQF)
- Because the programmes were usually three months long, institutions could cater for four times as many students per annum.
- Learners were encouraged, but not required to progress, so the committed pursued their studies and those satisfied to remain at their current levels did so – although they could return later if they so decided. The throughput problem that faces many formal learning programmes was therefore differently managed.
- The apprenticeships were undertaken in areas of national need, and apprentices frequently went on to make a significant contribution to the implementation of industrial projects of their day.
- The attainment of a matriculation certificate and diploma (the articulation bridges to the traditional education system) were made easy by rules of simple subject addition – a learner with an NTC 3 certificate need add only two languages to gain a senior certificate, and (albeit a bit later) those with an NTC 6 had only to add two subjects to gain a Diploma.

Elements of this model persisted for the remainder of the century – with the ATC I and II becoming N 4 – 6 over time, however their curriculae were not kept up to date for reasons which go beyond the focus of this paper to recount (see Bird, forthcoming) and the pathway fell into such disrepute by the turn of the century that it was earmarked for dissolution in 2006.

**The question: should such a model be revised today?**

The question that this paper asks is: sh*ould such a model not be updated and re-introduced today to address many of the problems identified above?* What would it entail? Some combination of revitalised 'N' courses with

'learnerships' in a structured arrangement, on a progression scale, leading to needed occupations (identified by the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations)?

Certainly the world has changed beyond recognition since the 1930s – but the central challenges facing the South African government today pertain to the delivery of basic services – such as houses and water and sanitation – for which basic skills will largely suffice. And similarly many production facilities also require basic skills.

The biggest challenge would be the location of sufficient numbers of workplaces where the workplace learning could be meaningfully undertaken to augment the 'N' course ladder (updated and re-invigorated). This is indeed a major challenge but there is much that government, in its role as developmental state, could do, for example:

- Industrial planning and investment incentives require training placements;
- Infrastructure delivery similarly require training placements;
- Public sector as the largest employer given targets;
- Publicly funded programmes such as the EPWP and National Youth Service schemes
- Financial incentives to the private sector (such as the proposed 'pivotal grant' and/or tax breaks)
- Assistance to relieve small employers of compliance burdens (through, for example, the expansion of 'virtual' employer agencies – the Employment and Skills Development Agencies)

This idea is not unique. Lolwana (March 2009) leaned towards such a solution as one item on a longer menu of options when she suggested that it should be possible for learners to take only one subject of the NCV e.g. welding, computer studies etc. She goes on:

> The possibility of an NCV available to those on learnerships (and others) even if it would take at least an additional year to complete. If this alternative route to a learnership was made a requirement, it could help raise standards, help force providers to offer off-the-job programmes and bring the public colleges in on the provision of learnerships, and thus increase the possibility of going on scale. … (2009: 45)

**Conclusion**

This paper has shown that the solutions advocated in 'the divided time' by the Departments of Education and Labour were both partial – both lacking the component the other could bring, and on their own both insufficient to address the scale of the problems currently being faced in the country. The establishment of the Department of Higher Education and Training creates the opportunity to augment these options with further, more integrated solutions. Furthermore, if the mandate of the QCTO were to include the revitalisation of the 'N' course ladder, would not a vehicle for the development of a modern-day version of this historic model already be available?

This paper in no way envisages that this 'working class highway' would or should *replace* the 'parallel pathway' model, nor does it suggest that the two are identical - it is clear that those who traverse the 'stacked qualification' route are unlikely to cover the same depth and breadth of discipline knowledge as do those following the 'parallel pathway' routes, however the 'progressive route', whilst different, could lead to the development of much needed skills and provide the learners with a route to 'decent work' which they might well otherwise have not had. It also potentially quadruples the capacity of colleges (as four times as many learners could be accommodated annually). The model also provides an alternative way of managing throughput problems – as those who do not wish to or are unable to progress for whatever reason can exit the system and then re-enter it at a later point. This model could therefore significantly contribute to building the 'inclusive growth path' to which government is committed.

The response of the 'academy' to this proposition is invited, as the proposal is still under policy consideration by the Minister of Higher Education and Training and his department.

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