

Redesign for ● journalism training at the NQF interface

A standardised system for journalism education could lead to a uniformity of editorial voices, warns JANE DUNCAN, Publications Co-ordinator of the Freedom of Expression Institute (FXI).



SOUTH AFRICAN EDUCATION and the media are both at the crossroads of transformation, and the place where they meet is a juncture dubbed the "NQF".

The National Qualifications Framework means that journalism training, as with all other courses, is expected to rationalise itself in terms of the new competency-based approach. This is a form of education that has been tried and tested internationally, with complex and controversial results.

It has been linked to broader 'high skill high wage' economic strategies of increasing international competitiveness, echoed locally in the Macro-Economic Strategy. This has tended to lead to what has become known as the 30%/70% society, where the economy relies on a minority of specialised workers, with the overwhelming majority of people semi- or unemployed and largely unemployable. These economic divisions are becoming increasingly apparent in this country.

What is also apparent is that struggles for the heart and soul of the NQF are underway here. There are two essentially conflictual positions: those in the progressive camp who see it as a mechanism for redress of educational imbalances, and business-related forces who see it as a means of increasing competitiveness in international markets (the 'human capital theory' approach)¹. Journalism trainers will need to position themselves in relation to these debates, assessing whether the new system will skill people to cope with the complex demands of South African journalistic work.

According to Dr. Denys Rhoadie: "A journalist cannot operate efficiently and effectively unless he knows the nature and functioning of the government and economic system, as well as the social environment and cultural composition of the society in which he works, including the historical factors that conditioned contemporary society. Journalism is one field that cannot exist on a foundation of narrow vocationalism."²

There are real dangers that, in this regard, the NQF will not deliver the goods. However, there may well be newspapers that would far prefer journalists who will simply 'do the job' without the critical awareness that journalism education calls for. Graeme Addison has noted a reluctance on the part of a number of employers in the mainstream media to employ university-trained cadets as they may not accept the pay scales and news values of their employers as readily as their technikon-trained counterparts.³ The employers may not be adverse to, and may even welcome, students who — under the new order — are trained to conduct 'discrete mechanical repair tasks' but who have no 'feel for the machine'.

Structuring journalism courses to fit the needs of the market may therefore serve the function of reinforcing the current concentration of ownership and a uniformity of voices at the level of editorial control.

While the need to skill cadets so that they can find jobs is very real, a constricted form of training will not contribute to increasing job opportunities — a goal that must involve the co-existence of a vibrant and diverse layer of independent and community media with the existing media houses. Indeed, journalism graduates both from universities and technikons need to be challenged to help create these opportunities, especially in areas and communities where media do not exist.

Schools of journalism need to be proactive on the NQF to prevent potential pitfalls, as tertiary level pilot projects will be set up at some stage. Work can also be done to establish which NQF field journalism should be incorporated into, according to how best its interests are served.

In addition, taking a proactive stance with regard to the NQF will mean that journalism schools can define their needs clearly before entering into negotiations with the media industry on educational vision, course content, number of students and the duration of study. (If the recent report of the National Commission on Higher Education is anything to go by, all these areas will be subject to negotiations with 'stakeholders').

Addison has noted that the technikon system is already subject to a centralised bureaucracy, which has led to a standardisation that could be used to suppress diversity, free expression and institutional autonomy.⁴ These dangers may be multiplied under the NQF, with the added danger that funds may be cut if journalism training cannot prove that it is economically useful.

However, reservations about the NQF should not be used to dodge the challenge of reconceptualising academic independence in order to transform elitism and exclusions. If journalism is to truly reflect the diversity of opinions in the country, it will need to address

'Competency education'

can "impose a narrow and short-sighted perspective on the definition of learning 'needs', weighing in favour of those 'objectives' which can be expressed in simplistic, often mechanical terms. Such a restrictive view of competence obscures and trivialises many essential aspects of learning for work as well as many critical elements of mastery in performance".

... A Canadian vocational instructor said of his own students: "These people can perform discrete mechanical repair tasks, but they have no feel for the engine...I wouldn't want to hire them in my garage!" (Jackson, N. 1989. The Case against 'Competence': the Impoverishment of Working Knowledge, in *Our Schools, Ourselves*, Vol. 1, No. 3, April, pp78-85)

THE NQF is envisaged as a single integrated framework that will standardise studies in particular areas, and issue nationally recognised qualifications centrally instead of on an institutional basis as is the case now. Under the NQF, education will become outcomes or competency based; in other words learning will be quantified in terms of how well certain pre-defined competencies are demonstrated.

itself to the nascent 30%/70% divide, both in terms of the economic and linguistic backgrounds its students are drawn from, and the news values developed in the course of study. These redress imperatives must not be sidelined in favour of a rands and cents approach.

Likewise, trainers should hold onto the point made by Australian journalist John Pilger that trainee journalists must be sensitised to the scale of human suffering of the poor in particular, and should resist attempts to be seduced by the news values of those who have no interest in seeing this exposed.

We in South Africa have a rich legacy of educational struggle to draw from, which has bequeathed to us a 'thick, rich' approach to pedagogy and curriculum design, including one that we can apply to education in the interests of media diversity.

We must be careful not to sacrifice this experience at the alter of the market. The NQF juncture provides alternative directions and journalism trainers need to explore these.

NOTES

1. Vally, S and Samson, M. 1996. Snakes and Ladders: The Promise and potential pitfalls of the National Qualifications Framework; *South African Labour Bulletin*; Vol. 20 no. 4, pp8-14 and 5, pp23-29.
2. Rhoadie, Denys.O. 1995. News-Editorial journalism education at higher educational institutions in the USA and the RSA; *Equid Novi*; Vol.16 (1&2); p144.
3. Addison, G. Technikon training for journalism and broadcasting; *Equid Novi*; Vol. 16 (1&2); pp151-152.
4. *ibid*: pp41-45.