The Learning Nation
A Namibian Policy on Lifelong Learning

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Introduction

As human beings we have an amazing capacity for learning. Indeed it is this capacity for learning that has apparently made us so dominant on the planet we inhabit.

Although this inborn propensity to learn is especially dramatic among children - who must, for instance, learn one or more languages in the space of a few years - it is no less essential among adults. Indeed, the stages, turning points and responsibilities of adult life (and death) also seem to be associated with complex learning tasks.

Internationally there is a growing demand for opportunities to learn, not just for children, but for adults as well. Observers of this phenomenon suggest that it has to do with many people realising that to survive they must make their own choices in a complex and risky situation; they cannot fully rely on government or industry or other powerful forces to make life choices for them. There are also other forces heightening this demand for opportunities to learn. Rapid technological change creates a scramble to keep up to date. Globalisation of trade can change patterns of existence and relationships overnight. Three to five changes of occupation are now to be expected in a working life. Social movements, such as for greater democracy, racial justice, and equality for women are also associated with profound changes and learning. And increasing international flows of information, even though uneven and unequal, can stimulate creativity and a new sense of opportunities.

Although the demand for new learning opportunities seems to be driven more by citizens, the private sector and civil society, rather than by governments, some authorities are also taking positive action to ensure that they have learning policies for both children and adults, so as to remain competitive. In developing countries there is a justified fear of being left at a still greater disadvantage by powerful international trends and the concentration of power in fewer hands. Thus, although the concept of lifelong learning has deep roots in many cultures, from all parts of the world, and is often imbedded in religious and philosophical thought, it was recently championed in the OECD, and the term is now commonplace in UNESCO, especially after the Delors report on Education in the 21st Century. Following the European Union Year of Lifelong Learning in 1996, several governments are now reshaping their education polices, the most recent being the British Government with their Policy on "The Learning Age". However, countries such as Thailand can point to lifelong learning policies having been in place since the 1970s, while African leaders such as Julius Nyerere long ago developed the justification for such comprehensive approaches to education.

Lifelong Learning in the Namibian Context

The struggle for Namibian independence was partly fought in the theatre of education. And the advent of independence coincided with the Jomtien Declaration of 1990 on Education for All. So it is not
surprising that Namibia's foundation document on education, 'Towards Education for All' includes a commitment to lifelong learning.

"It is important to stress again that we must all understand that learning continues throughout our lives. Our educators must design and refine strategies that make that possible and satisfying. Learning is more than accumulating little bits of information in formally designated settings during intensive but relatively brief periods. For learning to be liberating, it must involve developing both a critical consciousness and a solid sense of self-confidence. For learning to be developmental - both individually and collectively -- it must be encompassing and unceasing.'

Ministry of Education and Culture, Toward Education for All, a Development Brief for Education Culture and Training, Gamsberg, 1993, p 15

At this stage in our development it is important for us to note the progress that has been made in establishing such a system of lifelong learning.

About 26 per cent of the national budget is now devoted to various forms of education; it is the first item on the government's agenda. Through provisions for compulsory primary education in the constitution, over 90 per cent of Namibian children of school-going age are now in school, and programmes have been launched to reach marginalised groups and change the attitudes that exclude them. Extensive programmes have been introduced for in-service and pre-service training of teachers, whose salaries have also been increased. This has been coupled with comprehensive curriculum reform based on a learner-centred approach, with access, equity, quality and democracy being the watchwords. The National Literacy Programme was launched in 1992 with 15 000 participants, and now has an enrolment of 46 000. Post literacy Programmes are built in and are being extended, including a primary equivalent programme, a scheme to give credit for small enterprises, and a planned system of community learning centres. The Namibian College of Open Learning was established in 1998 as a parastatal and in that year attracted 17 000 learners. Presently the clientele is concerned with secondary education, but in future there will be greater emphasis on professional and vocational courses. There has been a similar expansion of distance education at the University of Namibia and the Polytechnic, with private colleges also springing up. A national plan of action for the development of adult learning was agreed at the end of 1998. Programmes of agricultural extension, vocational training, education associated with primary health care, and various environmental education programmes, now also operate quite widely in the country through both government and NGOs. A new policy on Information for Self-Reliance and Development” was adopted in 1997, and we look forward to this contributing significantly to improved libraries in schools and communities. A new policy on the arts and culture due this year will hopefully reinforce Namibia’s diverse and lively cultural scene. Key NGOs concerned with education now seem to have emerged from the difficulties of the transition associated with independence. The experience with education at the workplace seems to be mixed, but will soon be assisted by the founding of the Namibian Qualifications Authority. Despite our small population about 1.5 million, Namibia is blessed with a vibrant and free press, and several publishing houses, with many titles in print. Radio broadcasting reaches almost everyone, and TV is spreading.

A Namibian Definition or Understanding of Lifelong Learning

Although there is in Namibia an intuitive understanding of the importance of learning ‘from the cradle to the grave’ or ‘from womb to tomb’, this does not necessarily mean that there is a common understanding of the term lifelong learning. A preoccupation with formal education has also sometimes blinded us to the whole context of learning.
Many Namibians, for instance, paint doomsday scenarios around the young Namibians who do have a secondary education but cannot gain access to formal tertiary education or formal employment, because of the current state of our economy and national budget. In ten years time there could be 250 000 such young people in the country.

A different view of this situation, however, would be that we have a large number of young people who have basic literary, linguistic, mathematical and social skills. If these young men and women can be assisted to continue the development of their skills through open learning institutions such as NAMCOL and CES/UNAM, through the media, access to libraries and the Internet, national service schemes, agricultural and health extension programmes, skills training centres, political activism, and engagement in arts and cultural activities, they could be an even more influential, flexible and enterprising group than they are today, perhaps creating whole new industries in relation to tourism, entertainment, trade, etc, and breathing new life into our national culture.

Perhaps it is time for us to go through some process to develop a Namibian understanding or definition of lifelong learning and its role in our development as a successful African nation.

This understanding means the creation or reinforcement of an awareness throughout the population that we learn our way out of difficulties. This process of learning must be engaged in by each and every one of us throughout or lives, so that it is an obvious part of our culture or way of life. Just as important as the individual commitment to lifelong learning is the transformation of each an every institution of our society so that it actively supports lifelong learning. This means changing family life, life at work, educational institutions, our engagement in community-level bodies, democratic participation in government, and our creativity in communication through the arts.

Part of the change in concept is to think about learning, and not just about education in the sense of what happens in schools, colleges, and similar bodies. It is the difference between people who have the reading habit, and those who only have the ability read.

An Agenda for Achieving the Learning Nation

The creation of an environment that sustains lifelong learning is so complex a task that one is sometimes inclined to think it unmanageable. However, the experience of other countries suggests that there are some key areas of action that can be concentrated upon to good effect. For the sake of making them memorable, it is suggested that these key policies can be grouped around "five Cs":

- Nurture a Culture of Learning
- Co-ordinate Learning Activities
- Change Institutions to support Lifelong Learning
- Give Credit for Learning no matter how achieved
- Conceptualise what is happening and what should be done next.

If every Namibian citizen would follow this agenda we could rapidly become known as "The Learning Nation".

Nurturing a Culture of Learning
"Few things could be more important for our survival and prosperity than that we should foster in every possible way a culture of learning."
Hon John Mutorwa, Minister of Basic Education and Culture, at the Conference on the Future of Adult Learning, 1-2 September 1999, quoted from the Conference Report, Namibian Association for Literacy and Adult Learning, December 15 1998.

The nurturing of a culture of learning is indeed the function of leadership at every level of society, no matter how high or humble. It would seem that Namibia has been particularly blessed. Not only do our leaders preach about the virtues of education, but this has found expression in national plans and budgets, and in the personal example of prominent leaders who have enrolled for various forms of education themselves.

Perhaps, however, a great deal more could be done to enable Namibians to achieve learning through the many opportunities outside of formal school and university programmes. Again, it seems that it is often citizens themselves who grasp these new opportunities ahead of their leaders, if one looks for instance at the great interest of Namibians in radio, television and even satellite television reception, and in their enrolment in literacy and open learning programmes, some of the latter based in neighbouring countries or even thousands of miles from our borders. Libraries are experiencing a growing demand for their services. The number of Namibians gaining access to various telephone services and the Internet is also truly remarkable in the African context. What seems to be lacking is not the interest of the population, but the harnessing of this interest by those in leadership to achieve greater learning and benefit for the population.

Coordinating Learning Activities

It is axiomatic that to make the best possible use of the scarce resources available for lifelong learning, there must be mechanisms to achieve and negotiate co-ordination and synergy.

In Namibia there has recently been some debate on whether there should be one rather than two Ministries of Education. However, what this debate has missed is that already almost half the Ministries of Government are engaged in public education in one way and another. Furthermore, the private bodies with a role to play in the learning of the nation are also very significant in number. They cannot just be ordered to do this or that; there must be a process of persuasion and negotiation so that we find a common cause to the extent that it is possible.

What therefore seems to be called for is something like a Standing Commission on Lifelong Learning that will bring together government, the private sector, NG0s, civil society, the media, and charismatic figures, to lead and harmonise a national effort.

The following options could be considered for the placement of such a Standing Commission within Namibian Society:

- It could be an independent body supported jointly by government, private sector, NG0s, etc. (Funding and continuity is likely to be a problem.)
- It could be a body within the Office of the President, in a similar position to the Department of Women’s Affairs.
- It could be an Office within the National Planning Commission.
- It could be a Department within the Office of the Prime Minister.
Further consideration of these options is necessary.

**Changing Institutions to Support Lifelong Learning**

What we like to see in future is that every institution would see itself also as a lifelong learning institution.

A school would therefore not just busy itself with the learning of its enrolled children. (It would, of course make sure that the children leave it with the abilities and perspectives that will make the children critical and creative lifelong learners.) The school will also make its facilities available for literacy and opening learning programmes of adults. It will run programmes to ensure that parents understand exactly how they can support the learning of their children in various ways. Many schools will be community learning centres after school hours, with a co-ordinator who sets up study groups and cultural activities, gives access to library and information services and advises about other learning opportunities. The staff of the school will be an example to the community through their continuous engagement in learning to update their subject knowledge and teaching skills.

Similarly, a college or university will not just busy itself with its enrolled students, or with its research programme, but will be creating access to other learners through open learning programmes, and through an engagement with the public media, to bring new ideas and technology to all those who are interested.

Employers and Unions will take seriously the new corporate ideology that a successful corporation or firm is ‘a learning organisation’, one that puts resources into the development of its staff and has participatory structures to bring about constant improvement in its operational systems.

Government could contribute more to learning in many ways. One that has been found important in other countries is for government to communicate in "plain language" rather than to dress up its announcements and forms in jargon and careless layout that cannot be understood by the average user of its services.

One could dwell also on the changes that are needed in other institutions, in NG0s, in the media and information services, in religious bodies, in cultural institutions, and in commerce, but this can perhaps best be undertaken more systematically through a Standing Commission such as that suggested above, and though the monitoring mechanism suggested below under the heading ‘Conceptualise...’.

**Giving Credit for Learning**

Namibia is about to institute a new system to encourage learning at work and for work. Through the Namibian Qualifications Authority the qualifications required at various levels for a particular career path will be defined. This will give an incentive for staff members, and an opportunity for employers and providers of training, to increase the efficiency of their learning programmes. Government also has a keen interest in this form of human development and in time needs to develop tax and other incentives that will encourage the rapid growth of the private sector through learning. Lifelong learning is much more than learning at work, but the experience of many countries has been that the backbone of adult learning is to be found in the world of work. The development of the NQA therefore needs to be given a much higher priority. The composition of the NQA Council also needs
to be reviewed so as to bring about a better representation of its interest in adult learning and lifelong learning.

**Conceptualising what is happening and what should be done next**

For new Policies and Approaches to be effectively implemented it is essential that there be mechanisms to monitor their implementation. It is therefore proposed that one of the most important functions of the Standing Commission mentioned above would be to monitor our progress in becoming The Learning Nation. This could be done in terms of the attached grid. The grid could be run as a computerised information system. Under each square information could be gathered about the programmes that are relevant to it.

The grid could also be used as a challenge to each and every institution in the country. The institution should be challenged not just to be interested in a narrow target group - though that will perhaps remain its main business - but to think about how it could be more effective as a lifelong learning institution by also reaching out to other target groups. A group targeting the under fives, might begin to think, for instance, about how it can be more effective if it were also to target parents, grand parents, and older siblings.

This would use the horizontal lines of the grid. But an institution could also use the grid vertically, by asking, "Which other institutions could we team up with, to be more effective in what we are doing?" A pre-school body could therefore start to find out about adult education programmes, arts and culture bodies, information systems, etc that could be significant allies in its work.

**Conclusion**

As a first policy paper, this document seeks to create an understanding of what could be done by government, the private sector, NG0s, etc, for Namibia to earn the title of The Learning Nation.

The next step might be for the creation of the Standing Commission, or some similar body that is proposed here, so that more systematic programmes can be developed.

JE/21 Feb 1999
## Monitoring Instrument for the Development of Lifelong Learning

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<th>ECD 0 - 5 years</th>
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<th>Young Adults</th>
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