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A cat amongst pigeons? Challenges of quality assuring Life Orientation as a non-examination subject

Life Orientation is one of the 29 subjects of the National Curriculum Statement (NCS), which was introduced in Grade 10 in 2006, Grade 11 in 2007 and Grade 12 in 2008. Life Orientation is one of the four fundamental subjects within the seven subject package that learners must offer to qualify for the National Senior Certificate (NSC). 28 of the 29 subjects of the NCS are externally assessed in Grade 12. Life Orientation is the only subject that is completely internally assessed for certification purposes.

The 100% internal assessment nature of the subject calls for a quality assurance process that would verify the fairness and validity of assessment tasks, and also ensure the credibility of the assessment processes and systems in the different assessment bodies.

Umalusi adopted a two-pronged approach to the quality assurance of Life Orientation: audit of the implementation systems, and moderation of a sample of learner and educator portfolios.

This paper highlights the challenges experienced by schools regarding the delivery of Life Orientation, and the challenges of quality assuring in the absence of standards against which to evaluate learner performance. This will reflect on the validity of Life Orientation as part of the NSC.

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.1 Locating Life Orientation in the National Senior Certificate qualification

Life Orientation is a new subject in the National Senior Certificate (NSC). Unlike the other 28 of the 29 NSC subject package that comprise both internal assessment (25%) and an external examination component (75%), Life Orientation is 100% internally assessed for certification purposes. The tasks are set by teachers at school level. Learner evidence is then subjected to moderation at various levels.

The subject requirements for the NSC are as follows:

Four Fundamental Subjects
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Two official Languages (one on the Home Language (HL) level, and the other either HL or First Additional Language (FAL))
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mathematics OR Mathematics Literacy
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Life Orientation
Three elective subjects
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A minimum of any three subjects selected from a stipulated group.

A learner qualifies for the NSC if she/he satisfies the following pass requirements:

- Three subjects passed at 40% (one of these subjects must be a home language)
- Three subjects passed at 30%
- A learner can fail the seventh subject but must have evidence of the Site-Based Assessment thereof (SBA).

Contact time for the seven subjects offered is a total of 27,5 hours per week allocated as follows;

Subject	Time allocation per week
Language 1	4,5
Language 2	4,5
Mathematics and Mathematical Literacy	4,5
Life Orientation	2,0
Three elective subjects taken	12,0 (4 hours x 3)
Total	27,5

1.2 Rationale for Life Orientation as part of the NCS

Life Orientation is the study of self in relation to others and to society. It is concerned with the personal, social, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, motor and physical growth and development of learners.¹ Life Orientation is therefore multidisciplinary in nature. It has the following four Learning Outcomes (LOs) that describe the knowledge, skills and values that a learner should acquire:

- LO 1 : Personal well-being
- LO 2 : Citizenship education
- LO 3 : Recreation and Physical activity; and
- LO 4 : Careers and career choices.

Looking at the four LOs it is evident that Life Orientation should, by design and intent, be able to prepare learners for life, and for its responsibilities and possibilities. The question to ask then is whether the policy and guideline documents provide clear and specific content and achievement standards to be able to guide teachers in achieving the four LOs.

¹ National Curriculum Statement Grade 10 – 12 (General) Life Orientation, pg. 9 .

This paper begins by presenting a conceptual framework that seeks to clarify what quality assurance is, and differentiate it from quality control. This is done so that we can then understand the work that Umalusi – Council for Quality Assurance does in view of what the scholars perceive as quality assurance. The paper will then present the Umalusi approach to quality assurance of Life Orientation. This approach is illustrated by presenting the findings of the audit that Umalusi conducted on the Life Orientation implementation systems of all the nine Provincial Education Departments (PEDs), as well as the moderation of a sample of learner portfolios from the PEDs. The findings of the audit and the moderation will be used to illustrate why Umalusi finds it a challenge to quality assure and validate the outcomes of the Life Orientation assessment. The paper will conclude by presenting an approach that could be adopted to ensure that the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and Umalusi carry out their responsibilities of quality assurance and quality control appropriately.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Quality assurance of School-Based Assessment

One cannot talk about quality assurance of assessment without making reference to the two assessment principles: reliability and validity. According to Harlen (1994:13), “Quality in assessment is the provision of information of the highest validity and optimum reliability suited to a particular purpose and context”. The reliability of an assessment refers to the extent to which a similar result would be obtained if the assessment were to be repeated. Validity, on the other hand, refers to how well the result really reflects the skill, knowledge, attitude or other quality the test or examination was intended to assess. In other words does the assessment task effectively assess that which it is intended to assess?

SBA is said to have a lower reliability than external examinations, but it has a higher validity (Gipps, 1994). The usefulness of an assessment is directly related to its validity, providing it is not so low in reliability as to call this into question. According to Harlen (1994) therefore, the priority for ensuring quality in assessment is validity and, thereafter, every effort has to be made to increase the reliability, by increasing the specification of the task and the interpretation adopted.

According to Gipps (1994), the quality assurance of assessment is an approach that aims at standardisation or consistency of approach, and thus it focuses on the process of assessment. Quality control, however, focuses on ensuring that the outcomes are judged in a comparable way. Harlen (1994) distinguishes between quality assurance and quality control. For him quality control in assessment occurs after the event and includes:

- Use of reference or scaling tests for statistical moderation
- Inspection of samples by post
- Inspection of samples by visiting moderators
- External examining
- Teacher or learner requested moderation (appeals)
- Group/consensus moderation of internal assessments.

Quality assurance for Harlen refers to procedures where the main purpose is an attempt to increase the dependability of teacher assessments and would, therefore, usually take place before the assessment is conducted but can operate in a post-hoc fashion. These would include:

- Defining criteria for assessment
- Exemplification
- Approval of institutions, centres
- Visits of verifiers or moderators
- Group moderation.

Poliah (2009) defines the quality assurance of SBA as a planned and systematic process of ensuring the dependability of teacher assessment and thus increasing public confidence in SBA. This would

include all the activities that take place before, during and after the actual assessment, that contribute to an improved quality of SBA.

3. UMALUSI QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCESSES

Umalusi, a Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training, is a statutory body mandated to ensure the quality of the curriculum, provisioning and assessment of South African examinations. The General and Further Education and Training Amendment Act, 2008, mandates as follows:

- ²**17A.** (1) The Council must assure the quality of assessment at exit points.
- (3) The Council must perform the external moderation of assessment of all assessment bodies and education institutions.
- (4) The Council may adjust raw marks during the standardisation process.

Umalusi has consistently made use of the following quality assurance regime to ensure the credibility of the NSC and to provide confidence to the public:

- Moderation of question papers and marking memoranda
- Moderation of SBA
- Verification of marking moderation
- Statistical moderation of raw marks.

4. QUALITY ASSURANCE OF LIFE ORIENTATION

In 2008 Umalusi adopted a two-pronged approach to the quality assurance of Life Orientation: audit of the implementation systems, and moderation of a sample of learner and educator portfolios.

4.1 Purpose of the two-pronged quality assurance approach

4.1.1 The purpose of the audit was as to:

- determine the status of Life Orientation implementation across the nine PEDs;
- identify areas of good practice, areas of concern and strengths; and
- provide recommendations for improvement in relation to assessment and moderation of Life Orientation.

4.1.2 The purpose of the moderation of a sample of educator and learner portfolios was to:

- establish the fairness, validity and reliability of assessment tasks; and
- establish whether effective internal moderation of tasks and evidence of learner performance had been conducted at the school, cluster, district, provincial and national levels.

4.2 Approach and scope

4.2.1 Audit of Life Orientation implementation systems:

Interviews were held with the Life Orientation SBA coordinators in each of the nine provinces. The interviews were conducted in line with the interview schedule that focused on the following topics:

- Availability of Life Orientation policy and assessment guidelines;

²The General and Further Education and Training Amendment Act, 2008

- Level and quality of internal moderation;
- Training conducted at all levels of implementation; and
- Monitoring and evaluation of implementation processes.

4.2.2 Moderation of the teacher file and learner portfolios:

Sampling of Portfolios

The provinces were requested to do a random selection of learner portfolios using the categories outlined below:

- Rural, deep rural, peri-urban and urban districts
- Poorly resourced, semi-resourced or well-resourced schools
- Poorly performing, moderately performing and well performing learners.

Furthermore, Umalusi requested that the provinces ensure that the learner portfolios selected per school should fall within the following levels:

- 80–100%
- 70–79%
- 40–69%
- 0–39%.

The total number of learner portfolios required was as follows:

- Four (4) districts per province
- Four (4) schools per district in each province
- Twenty (20) learner portfolios accompanied by the teacher file per school.

The total number of portfolios requested per province was 320; thus in total 2880 portfolios were requested from the nine provinces.

4.3 Findings

4.3.1 Findings of the Life Orientation audit

The audit undertaken highlighted a few areas of good practice and some areas of concern across the nine provinces.

4.3.1.1 Areas of good practice observed in some PEDs

- Meetings, curriculum days and workshops are conducted for Life Orientation teachers as a way of providing support to schools.
- Reports and feedback on training, moderation and monitoring are provided in most provinces.
- In one province it was reported that teacher training is provided in partnership with non-government organisations, companies, hospitals and universities and master teachers are tasked to cascade training at school level.
- In another province it was reported that training was provided to all Life Orientation educators on the Physical Education Task (PET) that constitutes LO 3.

- The incorporation of a variety of tasks, including the performance- or participation-based certificate tasks, such as community work or participation in sports, was encouraged in some provinces. This was done with a view to enhancing the learning potential of learners.
- Two provinces reported that common assessment tasks were developed at cluster or district level. One province reported that they developed a bank of exemplar tasks which schools could use.

4.3.1.2 Areas of concern across the PEDs

- Life Orientation is regarded as a filler subject for teachers with fewer periods, therefore most assessment bodies do not have dedicated teachers and Heads of Departments for Life Orientation. Teachers would be instructed to ‘take care’ of the classes during the Life Orientation periods. This instruction was then interpreted differently by different educators, the outcomes ranging from making the learners clean the classrooms to making them run around the soccer pitch for the duration of the Life Orientation period.
- Very poor or non-existent dissemination of information and policy documents to remote schools was picked as a serious challenge in most assessment bodies. Such schools lack the proper guidance in as far as policy issues are concerned.
- Almost all the assessment bodies did not have policies relating to non-submission of portfolios by learners. The fact that Life Orientation is assessed 100% internally requires assessment bodies to have a policy as to how non-submissions should be dealt with.
- Poor implementation of LO 3 has been noted as a result of the lack of training and provision of resources for teachers. Sufficient time allocation as stated in policy documents and the provision of resources is crucial for the successful implementation of LO 3.

4.3.2 Findings of the moderation

Please note:

According to the Life Orientation Subject Assessment Guideline (SAG) five formal tasks must be administered at Grade 12 level:

- (i) Two examinations (75 marks each)
- (ii) 1 PET (100 marks)
- (iii) Two other tasks (75 marks each)

Total marks: 400

4.3.2.1 Areas of good practice observed in some PEDs

- There is compliance with National requirements in terms of the number of the five stipulated assessment tasks.
- In most PEDs the learner portfolios submitted for external moderation were very well organised.
- Internal moderation is conducted at all levels in most PEDS (cluster, school and district levels).

- Thorough internal moderation at the provincial level was evident in most PEDs.
- A few schools had very good assessment tasks.
- In one PED tasks exposed learners to a variety of forms of assessment, covering current affairs, and age-appropriate and learner-friendly issues such as Xenophobia and youth risk behaviours.
- Common mid-year examinations papers were written and administered in about four PEDs as a way of standard setting. The standard of these examination papers was good compared to individual tasks set for the other three LO components.

4.3.2.2 Areas of concern across the PEDs

- The quality of the assessment tasks developed by teachers at the school level is very poor. Generally, the majority of questions called for factual recall rather than application of skills. In cases where schools used internally-set examination papers the cognitive demand would not be in line with what the SAG stipulates: 30%:40%:30% which should be on the lower order, middle order and higher thinking skills respectively.
- Assessment of the PET – LO 3 proved to be a very serious challenge. According to the SAG, assessment in PET should cover all three movement sections (Fitness, Games and Sport, and Recreation), and marks should be allocated for participation (15) + performance (10) = 25 per term. Thus, the year mark for PET is 100. The challenge with PET is that teachers do not afford learners the opportunity to explore the wide variety of movement activities related to fitness, games and sport, and recreation. When it comes to the recording of marks most teachers would award learners 100%, which cannot be accounted for. This explains the very high pass rate in Life Orientation (see learner performance in Annexure A).
- The quality of internal moderation conducted at the school, cluster and district levels was found to be wanting. Moderation at these levels focused on checking for compliance, e.g., the number of tasks in the learner portfolio, the presentation of the learner portfolios.
- Formal programmes of assessment were included in a few educator files. The programme of assessment is supposed to give an indication of the tasks that are going to be administered, as well as the assessment tools that will be used.
- The development and use of marking tools was found to be problematic in the majority of learner files submitted. In most cases marks allocated would not be commensurate with the amount of work the tasks entailed.

5. CONCLUSION

The findings emanating from both the audit and external moderation of Life Orientation across the nine PEDs provide a very clear indication that the teaching and assessment of Life Orientation require urgent attention. The non-examination status of Life Orientation is a serious concern and all the SBA coordinators interviewed during the audit agreed that this creates a lot of instability in the teaching and assessment of this subject. For Umalusi the bigger question is “how do we approve results and report on the credibility of Life Orientation when it is treated differently from all the other 28 of the 29 NCS subject package, and when there is no standard against which to measure it?” This surely is a matter of “a cat amongst pigeons”. Umalusi has for the past two years always accepted the raw marks for Life Orientation – is this the right thing to do? What is the authenticity of these marks?

Looking at the challenges highlighted above relating to implementation and assessment of Life Orientation, as well as the quality assurance thereof, the following questions should be considered:

- (i) Should Umalusi in fact be doing quality assurance, or should they be carrying out quality control, which according to Harlen (1994) focuses on ensuring that the assessment outcomes are judged in a comparable way?
- (ii) Should quality assurance rather be made the sole responsibility of the Department of Basic Education (DBE)? After all quality assurance of assessment is, according to Gipps (1994), an approach that aims at standardisation or consistency of approach, and thus it focuses on the process of assessment. The DBE would be in a better position to carry this function out than Umalusi.
- (iii) If not, then how should Umalusi improve its quality assurance approaches in order to ensure the validity and dependability of teacher assessment and thus increase public confidence in the Life Orientation marks?

In answering these questions perhaps it would make sense to refer to the Queensland model of externally-moderated SBA. This system has been implemented since 1972 when high-stakes examinations were done away with in all subjects from the Preparatory Year to Year 12 (P-12).

The striking features of the externally moderated SBA are as follows³:

- Teaching, learning, assessment and reporting is aligned so that what is taught informs what is assessed, and what is assessed forms the basis of what is reported. This integration of teaching and learning with assessment is referred to as ‘authentic pedagogy’. When authentic pedagogy is practised, teachers do not teach and then hand over the assessment that ‘counts’ to external experts to assess what students have learnt. Authentic pedagogy occurs when the act of teaching involves placing high-stakes judgements in the hands of teachers.
- Teachers work in partnership with the Queensland Studies Authority to develop high-quality assessment tasks.
- Consistency of teachers’ judgments is promoted when teachers engage in professional dialogue to discuss and analyse the connections between standards and student work.
- Clear and specific content and achievement standards are included in syllabuses, Essential Learnings and guidelines.
- ‘Social moderation’ is conducted. Groups of trained teacher-reviewers meet formally to assure the quality of assessment instruments and ensure that judgments of standards are comparable from school to school through a process of negotiation.

Queensland’s system is a highly regarded model for quality assurance of educational standards. It is a system with many benefits but above all it promotes authentic pedagogy and confirms the role of teachers as professional.

Life Orientation is a very useful subject in the 29 subject package of the NCS. It is a non-academic subject that is designed to prepare learners for life and its responsibilities and challenges. The challenge is in ensuring authentic pedagogy in the implementation of this subject so that the desired effects can be realised, and so that the assessment of Life Orientation becomes authentic, valid and reliable.

RECOMMENDATIONS

According to Poliah (2009), quality assurance has an internal and external component. In South Africa, internal quality assurance is the joint responsibility of the PEDs and the DBE, and external quality assurance is the responsibility of the Quality Assurance Council, Umalusi.

Recommendation 1

³ Queensland Studies Authority – School-based assessment: The Queensland system

The introduction of a 100% SBA as in the case of Life Orientation requires major changes to the curriculum documentation. The DBE is currently involved in the process of ‘repackaging’ the curriculum documents, which will culminate in the development of a single Curriculum Assessment Policy (CAP) document for each of the 29 NSC subjects. Umalusi must take advantage of this process to ensure that the CAP document for Life Orientation includes more detail on the aims, content, pedagogical approaches and assessment specifications. This detailed CAP document should be in a position to assist the teacher in practicing authentic pedagogy

Recommendation 2

Umalusi must assume responsibility of quality control, which focuses on ensuring that the outcomes are judged in a comparable way. This can only be achieved if the DBE then takes full responsibility of the quality assurance of assessment in the PDEs.

Umalusi must put mechanisms in place to ensure that the following happens:

- The DBE develops a pool of assessment exemplars to assist teachers in the setting of good assessment tasks.
- At least one of the 5 LO tasks, perhaps one of the two examination papers, must be set as a common task at the provincial level. Umalusi would then use the results of this one task to do statistical moderation of the other four tasks. This scenario could be reversed once the teachers shall have demonstrated capacity to set valid tasks.
- The DBE must take responsibility for ensuring that teachers are trained to develop quality tasks. The training should also include the development and use of appropriate assessment tools to be able to achieve the desired outcomes of LO. The DBE could then contract a university that teachers would work in partnership with to develop high quality assessment tasks.
- The DBE ensures that PEDs train teachers and subject advisors who will be used to carry out the “Social moderation” at cluster, district and provincial level. Groups of trained reviewers would meet formally to assure the quality of assessment instruments before they are administered, and ensure that judgments of standards are comparable from school to school through a process of negotiation.
- The DBE also appoints and trains reviewers who will conduct a national moderation of a sample of learner evidence.
- The DBE report to Umalusi on the moderation process and its outcomes.

With all the above in place, Umalusi would then be able to focus on ensuring that the assessment outcomes are judged in a comparable way. Umalusi would achieve this by 1) calling for a sample of learner evidence moderated by the DBE for verification purposes, and 2) doing statistical moderation of the four Life Orientation tasks against the one task that shall have been set and used as a common task at PED level. The nine PED tasks shall have been moderated by the DBE before being administered to learners. This would then be strengthened by detailed reports coming from the DBE on the “social moderation” they shall have conducted. The cat in Life Orientation will then be less of a cat but more a pigeon.

6. REFERENCES

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Annexure A: Learner performance in Life Orientation (2008)

PROVINCE	Distribution in number of candidates							CANDIDATES	Distribution in %						
	0-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-79	80-100		0-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-79	80-100
EC	446	1564	10456	21499	21926	10961	3517	70369	0.63	2.22	14.86	30.55	31.16	15.58	5.00
FS	134	259	1555	5829	10885	7856	3790	30308	0.44	0.85	5.13	19.23	35.91	25.92	12.50
GAU	189	1075	6894	20503	32582	25584	14293	101120	0.19	1.06	6.82	20.28	32.22	25.30	14.13
KZN	941	1457	11378	31489	44775	31145	16806	137991	0.68	1.06	8.25	22.82	32.45	22.57	12.18
LIM	11	25	748	26834	35439	22187	7334	92578	0.01	0.03	0.81	28.99	38.28	23.97	7.92
MP	166	693	5428	15865	18612	10381	3864	55009	0.30	1.26	9.87	28.84	33.83	18.87	7.02
NC	22	144	817	2741	3893	2282	841	10740	0.20	1.34	7.61	25.52	36.25	21.25	7.83
NW	71	193	2168	7421	11264	7307	2751	31175	0.23	0.62	6.95	23.80	36.13	23.44	8.82
WC	186	659	4604	11668	15065	9390	4678	46250	0.40	1.42	9.95	25.23	32.57	20.30	10.11
National	2166	6069	44048	143849	194441	127093	57874	575540	0.376342	1.054488	7.653334	24.99375	33.7841	22.08239	10.0556

NB

- Pass mark is 30%
- Failure rate is very low: 0.37%