

1. Why is assessment so prominent in the NQF and education policy generally?

There are several reasons for the current emphasis on assessment. Briefly, some of these are:

- There has been an attempt to shift from a primary focus on traditional or received ideas of what should go into a learning situation (inputs) to a focus on what we want to achieve. If the main questions are, for example, “What do we want to achieve? What kind of qualities (knowledge, skills, values) do we want to be the result of a process of learning?” then we are already dealing with questions of assessment.
- There is a perception that poor education and training is characterised by a serious lack of fit between the aims and noble intentions of learning and the way that learning is assessed. For example, it is often asserted that “we teach the learners to think for themselves”. Yet many assessments do the opposite, testing whether the learners can parrot what the teachers have drilled into them. Where assessment is limited to this kind of approach only, the negative ‘backwash’ effects on learning are well-known: teachers or trainers ‘teach to the test’ and opportunities for deeper learning may be lost. If however assessments focus on reasoning, analysis and problem solving, these activities are more likely to be built into teaching.
- Linked to the point above was the perception that the education and training system prior to the NQF was biased in favour of rote learning at the expense of critical thinking. The NQF therefore emphasized a broader and more explicit role for assessment, aimed at fostering practices that would value abilities such as critical thinking and problem solving over the memorisation of facts (for example). Additionally, formal assessment and certification systems were seen as a mystified set of bureaucratic practices from which the actual practitioners had been largely excluded. The emphasis on assessment in the NQF had a transformative agenda, aimed at opening up assessment to full participation by those involved in education and training.

[Answer to FAQ 1, The NQF and Assessment, the NQF Gateway]