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Emerging themes, frameworks and underpinning values from the Special International Roundtable on Higher Education, Lifelong Learning and Social Inclusion: Common interests, uncommon goals

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The special international roundtable did not fail to fulfill the potential of revisiting the array of issues and foci that the range of exports from across six continents presented. Indeed, because of the nature of its design, the roundtable ultimately helped to develop a more comprehensive framework for understanding the rich and varied perspectives that the presentations generated. While the richness was gratifying, the varied nature of the presentations was nothing more than expected. Given the coverage of the thematic section which spans higher education, lifelong learning and social inclusion, it was an expectation that the presentations offer insights into aspects, principles and elements of practice from these areas with a similarly varied range of objectives and goals. How then do we structure

this body of rich but varied set of presentations? One clear direction from the roundtable itself was that we needed to develop an overarching paradigm which would enable us to engage with the presentations in the context of an emergent framework of practice in the various areas, a structure based on emergent themes, and finally, a structure in terms of their philosophical underpinnings.

Deriving from the proposed frameworks, the products of the roundtable engagement offered us three dimensions of analysis. First, there was a clear indication that presentations were focused on an emergent framework for practice in the three inter-linked areas represented in the thematic section. Central to this framework are three core issues. The first issue in this context is the issue of personal validation. Drawing from some of the presentations on offer, it was clear that the notion of personal validation, both for individual practitioners, as well as organizations was a crucial issue. Marta Anczewska, in examining burnout in health professionals stressed the importance of destigmatising professional assistance and more importantly, indicated that a crucial factor in this process is personal empowerment. Still reflecting the notion of personal validation, Reyna del Carmen Martinez Rodriguez and Lilia Benitez Corona affirmed to its importance by highlighting the significant role that self-efficacy plays when students were exposed to cooperative learning experiences. In a similar vein, Gordon Ade-Ojo highlighted the organizational dimension of personal validation with his proposal of a regime of self-regulation towards assisting colleagues in Further Education colleges to transcend the contemporary identity crisis through an engagement with greater self-regulation. Finally, Antra Roskosa invited us to share the perception that a sense of belonging and an increase in self-esteem was a key strategy for instilling a sense of personal as well as national pride. It appeared that presenters were, in this context, of one voice in advocating that when the locus of control was intrinsically rather than extrinsically motivated, a person's 'humanness' was affirmed and with it greater fulfillment in life resulted. Nowhere was this more evident than in Philip Higgs' and Rosemary Moeketsi's presentation in which it was contended that the concept of 'Ubuntu' (A South African language's term for respect, politeness and compassion) and communality that needed to be at the forefront of any reform agenda. Sounding through many of the presentations, therefore, was the sonorous note, which sought to acknowledge the importance of intrinsic validation of policy, practice and indeed, perceptions. As such, what many presentations in the thematic section advocated was the development of a framework that has at its core, self-endorsement, either in the way we deliver our practices, or indeed, in the way that we, as organizations and policy makers respond to our immediate socio-political environment.

A second emergent framework revolved around policy direction. Central to

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this framework is the understanding of the importance of policy in enabling the delivery of practice. James Ogunleye highlighted the significance of policy using the example of the role of the EU legal framework in the implementation of the EMILIA project, which aimed at strengthening lifelong learning amongst people with mental health problems in 11 EU countries. He argued that without a policy framework, project fragmentation would ultimately become inevitable. Pursuing a similar argument, but highlighting the potential impact of a lack of policy framework, Lodewikus indicated that, because of the absence of a robust legislative structure for protecting minorities, the language and hence the culture of the San people, could only be protected by private ventures such as the provision of a 'mini educational system'. In essence, the absence of a macro-level policy engagement was unanimously seen as spelling doom for micro-level delivery of practice. A framework for policy engagement, therefore, was seen as not only desirable, but ultimately inevitable in the work that needs to be done.

A final emergent framework drew attention to the issue of organizational support and training. Ana Canen demonstrated that curriculum organization and the awareness of experts via the medium of cooperative learning in science education is one way of making learning more interesting and relevant. Gita Verdina from Latvia explored the same theme concluding that contemporary education management processes needed to be more strategic in order to provide the required level of information to staff and students alike. Richard and Linda Berlach took more of a bird's-eye view, suggesting that for any curriculum to be meaningful and sustainable, it first needed to be interrogated across at least ten dimensions that they proposed. Emerging from all of these is the notion of the importance of organizational support and training in the achievement of the ultimate goal of improving teaching and learning.

The second prism through which the presentations can be viewed and which also became obvious during the roundtable was content thematization. Perhaps the most obvious theme which was identified by its relative paucity was the theme of internalization. While it could be argued that the international dimension was present in as much as researchers who presented at the conference were representative of diverse countries from different continents such as Africa, North, Central and South America, Europe, Asia, and Australia, the collaborative essence of internationalized scholarship was lacking. This, as we shall see later, was central to the conference's views on the direction of development. Perhaps in compensation for the gap in terms of international collaboration, cultural diversity reflected through a range of scenarios emerged strongly as a common theme. This theme was eminently represented by Gordon's presentation on regional and profession specific literacies, and by Philip and Rosemary's presentation on the concept of

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'Ubuntu' , which is again region-bound.

Another theme common to the presentation was the perception of the superiority of cooperation over competition. The emerging message in this respect was that cooperation rather than competition should be the goal, both in the preparation of students for their future professions (including teaching) and for developing curriculum and assessment strategies at classroom and institutional levels. This theme also became evident in the context of the valuing of diversity, cultural differences and plural identities.

A theme built around how excluded identities in school and higher education practices tend to perpetrate discrimination against non-hegemonic groups, and the ways in which they constitute a detrimental factor to achieving set goals in higher education and lifelong learning, was also very prominent. In exploring this theme, the scope of excluded identities had its realization in many contexts including its impact on specific national identities, and on other stakeholders in the education enterprise such as students with special needs, students with language/ linguistic barriers (second language learners), and learners with mental disabilities, as well as students and professionals suffering from burn-out and bullying, among others.

A final way of looking at the product of the conference is through the prism of a driving underpinning value or principle. Underlying this perception is a basic question; what is the common value shared by all of the presentations? When Masmann, Bray and Manzon (2007) titled their book on the history of world council of comparative education and its members, it is probable that even they could not have anticipated the extent to which that title capture the ethos of some of the latter works that were presented in one of the chapters of the World Society of Comparative Education. That title, 'Common interests: uncommon goals', appears to have captured the essence of the presentations in this thematic section of the conference. Alongside every other emergent theme and framework that this section threw up, it was clear at the roundtable that there was recognition of the commonness of interests even if goals were uncommon. What the series demonstrated was the fact that while in specific contexts, our goals might not be the same, or might indeed be dissimilar, there was no doubt that there was a consensus that our interests remained unshakably constant. Those interests, as reflected in the various presentations, can be surmised as 'the promotion of the course of teaching and learning and the development of education in different contexts.' Bestriding these interests was the underpinning value of daring to challenge orthodoxy, conventions and a sometimes mistaken notion of the supremacy of universalism. That value brings its own attendant features such as the prioritization of contextualism and the encouragement of experimentation and innovation. There was no doubt that each and every presentation at the conference could associate in

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one way or the other to these values and principles. What the presentations have done in essence, is to offer insights, as to how—through a range of uncommon goals—we have strived to achieve common interests. That, in our view, was the essence of this round of the thematic section four's roundtable event at the 10th BCES conference.

But all of this cannot be completely fulfilling if we do not venture into what the future might hold. The dominant view from the roundtable appeared to have identified a number of directions. First, there is a demand for inter-disciplinary collaboration such that the uncommonness of goals but commonness of interest might fully blossom. In this respect, there is a call for colleagues to explore the potential for dealing with social inclusion within an inter-disciplinary framework, so as to exchange knowledge and narratives of challenges as well as of success stories and of strategies to challenge exclusionary practices. The second direction of development invites colleagues to provide more comparative narratives across countries. The identified contexts of such comparative engagement include developments in research and practice, legislative impact and the use of innovative resources and strategies. The inevitability of this direction of development is underlined by the common interest to meet the challenges imposed by the tension generated between preparing for a globalised, technologised world and imbuing future teachers with multicultural and anti-discriminatory perspectives. This, we would argue, is a challenge that is common to all and, therefore justifies its choice as one of the directions for future development.

A final direction for future development identified at the roundtable invites colleagues to break new ground by recognizing that lifelong learning can and should apply to young people as well as older people. In this context, there is some evidence that the exploration of how the relationship between children and their parents, young people and official adults can impact on the decisions on teaching and learning that we make. Crucial are questions such as: could we improve teaching and learning in the lifelong sector by factoring in a sense of collaboration between parents and children? Would our decisions be more considered if we recognized that their impact is not one-dimensional? If colleagues took up the gauntlet and decided to pursue these directions of development, the next conference in particular and subsequent ones in general promise to be exciting indeed.

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