

SOUTH AFRICAN DEMOCRATIC TEACHERS UNION

**THE ROLE OF FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING
COLLEGES IN ENHANCING SKILLS DEVELOPMENT TO
COMBAT POVERTY**

**ARE FET COLLEGES EDUCATION SUB-SECTOR IN A POSITION TO
DELIVER ON ITS EDUCATIONAL MANDATE??**

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Abstract

The connection between poverty and lack of education seems entirely self-evident, yet real progress in overcoming the obstacles to education and economic affluence has eluded governments and social activists worldwide for decade. This document intends to interrogate how can further education and training enhance skills development initiatives in combating poverty in the South African situation. The importance of Further Education and Training (FET) colleges in responding to the skills development needs of South Africa will be analysed. This discussion document will focus on the national development trajectory; understanding of the role of the FET college sector; and funding and governance.

Introduction

Government has repeatedly emphasized the importance of the FET college sector in providing the intermediate skills required in the country. The then Minister of Education, at a DoE/HSRC Conference (Pandor, 2006) declared that: "... colleges are central to our agenda of developing skills... It is our intention to build and sustain a well-designed set of institutions, offering flexible programmes and ensuring that we have students qualified in critical skills."

This commitment is an important one. Not only does it place colleges at the centre of the national skills agenda, it also establishes government commitment to its importance. A well designed institutions with flexible programmes (and delivery forms) presumably responsive to a target audience that goes beyond the traditional school-leaving youth component, the college sector is expected to appropriately respond to the critical skills agenda. An amount of R1.5 billion was made available in 2005 (DoE, 2005a) and this was reportedly increased to R1.9 billion in 2007 (Pandor, 2007). Funding of this kind gives substance to articulated commitments from the highest level of government.

Similarly, the Ministry of Labour has, in the National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS 11), argued for the central role of FET colleges in the delivery of sector skills imperatives. Colleges have been earmarked to respond to these national skills development imperatives in creative ways, asserting their role as preferred providers for the delivery of skills between 2005 and 2010 (DoL, 2005). The articulated importance of the sector in the national skills development context means that there is potential for the sector to raise its profile. There is also a need for colleges themselves to seize the initiative to take their rightful place as a significant component of the national skills development agenda.

In addition, the Ministries of Education and Labour agree that the colleges are intended to respond to an access prerogative and provide an avenue for youth and adults who are intent on

securing access to the labour market. The potential of the sector to serve as an interface of national skills development provision as well as a redress opportunity for those denied skills provision in the past is evident. The Minister of Education reiterated this point at the Limpopo FET Colleges Conference:

... ‘colleges are not poor people’s universities or places for other people’s children; (there needs to be a) recognition that further education colleges will begin to provide the majority of our young people with solid foundations for meaningful careers (Pandor, 2005).

FET colleges are, therefore, intended to take their place, at least rhetorically, as meaningful places for career preparation and as appropriate sites of learning for employment and self-employment.

This conceptualization begins establishing the envisaged role of FET colleges in the national development trajectory. This is followed by an analysis of the current form, context and challenges facing the sector in South Africa. It concludes by examining the potential and challenges facing the sector in the South African education and training framework.

The national development trajectory

The current socio-economic context in South Africa is underpinned by national development considerations of poverty, unemployment and inequality (Bhorat & Kanbur, 2006; Woolard, 2006). The government has, since 1994, articulated the need to deal with some of these remnants of the apartheid racial order, but has found its efforts frustrated by a deeply entrenched and entrenching structural condition of inequality. Balancing the needs of those who have and who do not in a deeply racialised socio-economic context makes the challenge that much more complex. In addition, the ravages of HIV/AIDS pandemic and rampant crime are especially pressing. The international neo-liberal context, which serves to reduce rather than expand the role of the state to deal with some of the challenges, makes the likelihood of success that much less likely. Despite the measures intended to deal with some of these challenges, the enormity of the task of engaging with some of them is not inconsiderable.

The RDP agenda espoused by South Africa’s first post-apartheid government in 1994 placed particular attention on responding to socio-economic legacy. The change to the GEAR agenda in 1996 signaled a marked shift in government thinking about redistribution and placed considerable attention on the role of macro-economic stability in its pursuit for growth as a primary feature for development. This change had particularly serious impacts on government spending imperatives, social spending in particular, and on delivery of key services. Impacts on

education, inter alia, a reduction in absolute numbers of teaching personnel which were considered to be a significant element of education spending (Akoojee & McGrath, 2004).

Assessments of both GEAR and the RDP have reviewed the role of both for macro-economic and social development. It has been suggested that, in retrospect, the RDP was neither so explicitly socialist nor GEAR so fundamentally capitalist as has been conventionally argued (Buhlungu et al, 2004; Gelb, 2003; 2004). Indeed, in both these national strategies a commitment to both growth and equity as fundamental to social and economic transformation can be found. In an attempt to strike an appropriate balance between the two, there is an implicit understanding that the one is privileged over the other. The Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative (AsgiSA) owes some of its genesis to the incomplete and partial success of the redistributive component of the previous RDP and GEAR initiatives. AsgiSA became clearly a significant feature of the national development until the Polokwane Conference in 2007. The then President Thabo Mbeki announced its launch in July 2005, ostensibly to assist in meeting the ANC's 2004 election pledges (ANC, 2004), accelerate employment equity, and improve broad-based black economic empowerment.

Particularly crucial to the AsgiSA was its espoused commitment to spending priorities, public infrastructure, private investment and skills development. While growth was crucial to the achievement of these goals, the centrality of education and training to its achievement was paramount. The summary document for AsgiSA argued the following in this regard:

“For both the public infrastructure and the private investment programmes [AsgiSA priorities 1 and 2], the single greatest impediment is shortage of skills- including professional skills such as engineers and scientists; managers such as financial, personnel and project managers, and skilled technical employees such as artisans and IT technicians (RSA, 2006).

The realization that skills deficits are an important constraining feature of development is an important one and places the importance of education and training at the forefront of policy. It is significant that the strategy encompasses all levels of the education and incorporating FET colleges. It identified the following in particular:

- Achieving higher levels of literacy and numeracy in early stages of school.
- Doubling the number of mathematics and science high-school graduates by 2012
- Upgrading career guidance.
- Upgrading public FET colleges.
- Expanding Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) delivery.

The AsgiSA plans also introduced a new structure dedicated to skills development to drive this process: Joint Initiative for Priority Skills Acquisition (Jipsa). At the launch of the Jipsa, the following key areas of skills shortage were identified and to be targeted:

- High-level engineering and planning skills for infrastructure development.

- City, urban and regional planning and engineering skills for local and provincial governments.
- Artisans and technicians, especially for infrastructure development.
- Management and planning skills in the social sectors and for local government.
- Teacher training for mathematics, science and English.
- Skills for the priority sectors, especially in project management, general management and finance.
- Skills for local economic development (Mlambo-Ngcuka, 2006).

Jipsa acknowledges that it intends to build on more than a decade of policy and institutional development in education and training, which incorporates key supply features incorporating schooling, further education and higher education.

For FET colleges, Jipsa has identified the role of key developments. In addition to the merging of apartheid institutions, the recapitalization programme and curriculum reform (implemented in 2007), the sector saw an injection of R1.9 billion into the sector to achieve the reorientation of the sector. The sector also incorporates the skills development system, driven by the two National Skills Development Strategies (DoL, 2001a; 2005b) and featuring a new vocational qualification (the learnership), a levy-grant mechanism and Sector Education and Training Authorities (Setas). Jipsa intended to incorporate an overarching human resource development strategy, as proposed then by the departments of Education and Labour in 2001 (DoE & DoL, 2001), which was designed to co-ordinate the work of the two departments and other national and provincial departments.

This overall policy framework and the action plan implied by AsgiSA and Jipsa suggested an important role was envisaged for skills development which places colleges at the critical edge of the country's national skills development trajectory.

FET colleges are, therefore, considered crucial to the success of the current South African national development agenda and there is at least some consensus about the role of a sector which has been so racialised and gendered in the past. Thus, while it is still very evident that 'South African development policies are still profoundly shaped by the twin legacies of colonialism and apartheid and their shaping model of uneven and skewed development' (McGrath & Akooje, 2007), there have been some very real attempts to engage skills priorities under Jipsa. In addition, the legacy of polarization between high- and low-skill elements leads to serious underdevelopment of intermediate skilling, considered to be key to industrialization and competitiveness (Kraak, 2003; McGrath, 2004). Clearly, this is being done in the context of urgency to resolve the short-term skill needs in the light of the needs of the 2010 Soccer World Cup and the critical imperative urgency to develop appropriate infrastructure. The need to meet the pressing deadlines for development of stadiums and associated infrastructural development placed skills development on the government's high priority list.

Towards understanding the FET college sector: Salient trends

The FET college sector has been quite radically changed from its previous apartheid-defined structure. Since 1994, particular attention has been paid to, inter alia, the structural re-organisation of the sector in order that it might be deracialised and responsive to the new socio-economic context. Over 150 of the former FET institutions have been merged to 50 new entities, a process which has, at least technically, been successfully completed, although the changes have generally been complex (Adams et al, 2006). This has created a much more streamlined college establishment which should enable colleges to be flexible enough to engage the current skills development priorities. Although much has still to be done, especially in those sites located in areas neglected under apartheid, some promising trends are evident.

Enrolment

Enrolment at FET colleges is still lower than in universities and the former technikons comprising the Higher Education and Training (HET) sector, although some promising trends are evident over the last decade. Latest figure indicate that since 1999 the proportion of college enrolments has increased from 139 000 in 1999 to 144 000 in 2002, an increase of 2%. It is interesting that this increase happened at a time of considerable upheaval associated with the restructuring of the sector. Admittedly, more needs to be done, with the current attention given to skills development priorities. This is still below the quite substantial increase in enrolment at universities (9%) and technikons (3%). Colleges still comprise less than a quarter of all post-school education and training enrolment in the country.

Colleges have, however, been remarkably responsive to post-1994 learner demographics. The quite powerful demographic shift from 1992 to 2002 is evidenced by transformation of predominantly white enrolment to one that is now largely African. The African student component, which increased from 15% to 74% was replaced with a white proportional representation from 67% to 16% in 2002. This indicates that the 'second-class' status of colleges is being replaced with one in which there is a sense that they are an important avenue to secure skills which enable access to the formal labour market. There is an expectation that as more and more youth understand that the skills developed in these institutions can lead to employment (or self-employment), this can be improved.

Age Profile

The FET sector in South Africa has traditionally responded to the post-school youth learner cohort. This is in contrast to some other countries which have been able to respond to the more mature adult learners as part of a response to globalisation's effect of encouraging re-skilling over the life course (Doe & DoL, 2001). Furthermore, there is a realization that little has been done with respect to adult education in the country (Mbeki, 2007). As in some other countries (England, for instance) colleges have been considered an important avenue to provide opportunities for adults who have not been afforded skills under apartheid (Akoojee, 2006). In this respect, colleges have displayed an increasing awareness of the need to increase numbers of more mature learners.

This trend suggests that colleges are beginning to respond to lifelong learner needs in keeping with developments in other countries (see DoE & DoL, 2001). This is promising in the light of DoL imperative to enable skills development for older (employed and unemployed) learners. Therefore, while the traditional clientele of colleges remain intact and (which is consistent with the DoE target market), colleges have already begun to respond quite effectively to the more mature learner set, despite not having been specifically required to do so.

Programme trends

Colleges are still dominated by provision in the fields of engineering and business, which comprise 90% of the total enrolment in the sector (Powell & Hall, 2004). While this leaves space for more programme diversification, the existing enrolments in these fields are quite important in the light of the country's skills requirements. Indeed, recent economic developments (the rights to host the 2010 Soccer World Cup, for instance) and the much publicized skills deficiencies in municipal delivery mean that the skills that colleges are already engaged in providing are sought after. This suggests that these priorities could meaningfully be inserted as strategic priority focus areas. Since municipalities are key in the achievement of these activities, it is counter-intuitive that some colleges have not as yet identified this sector as a partner in their skills development efforts.

The level at which programmes are delivered provides an important area which could be developed. Most enrolments (40%) are pegged for courses between Level 2 to 4 on the National Qualifications Framework with the majority of learners registered in 'engineering' (Powell & Hall, 2004). In this respect, while the engineering learner numbers at lower levels and are not matched at the post- Level 4 where there is an enrolment of fewer than half that of the previous level, the trend shows that there is nevertheless a base from which to build. Programmes in the 'business' areas, however,

are characterized by an opposite trend, with post- Level 4 enrolment estimated at almost four times that of the lower levels. This suggests that the skills developed in this area could be effectively re-targeted for public service delivery.

Partnerships enable colleges to be in touch with their labour-market constituency. A study by the National Business Initiative (NBI) showed that in 2002 there was a total of 1 852 linkages or joint projects between colleges and industry (Powell & Hall, 2004). Most of the partnerships were with business (51%) and there were only a small number with Setas (3%). This is significant for a sector only recently introduced to the importance of linking up with their learner destinations. More recent evidence suggests that this is steadily improving (Danida, 2006). There is, nevertheless, potential for development.

Indeed, evidence points to a robust ‘learner placement’ component of the partnership structure. More than 50% of partnerships with industry were directed at learner placements and ‘training provision’. Another 50% of partnerships with government were related to community training, provision of training and work placement (DoE, 2004). While this is encouraging, there is clearly a case for building on these and expanding current linkages by structural means.

There is, in addition, considerable space for partnerships to be developed in light of the skills development imperatives identified in the NSDS which has as its vision the development of ‘skills for sustainable growth, development and equity’ (DoL, 2005). This will enable FET colleges to respond to the skills development needs of various groups, especially those considered to be most in need (the post-school youth target market), while at the same time responding to the needs of older learners (the employed and unemployed and those needing to be re-skilled as a result of the changed political/economic circumstances). The very different target markets will enable the much needed synergy with business and industry which many programmes are aspiring to. This needs to be done in conjunction with the allocation of much needed resources required to achieve necessary infrastructure upgrading to enable quality delivery. While the effects of recapitalization are likely to be felt, there is a need to ensure that funding is sustained.

Funding and Governance

Governance funding is the key to the success of the public college sector in engaging the skills-development priorities of the country. Indeed, there is a need for colleges to contribute to the more than 50 000 apprentices needed in the country between 2007 and 2010 (Pandor, 2007). It is essential to ensure that attention is paid to both governance and funding. President Thabo Mbeki in his 2007 State of the Nation address has placed this aspect on the education agenda of the country:

“The progress we have made with regard to the recapitalization of FET colleges has created the possibility for us to significantly expand the number of available artisans. Starting this year, resources will be allocated to provide financial assistance to trainees in need who enter these institutions. At the same time, we shall urgently resolve the issue of responsibilities between the national and provincial spheres in the management of the FET system. We do hope that our efforts to promote this area of opportunity will help send the message especially to our young people, that artisan skills are critical for economic growth as other levels of qualification. (Mbeki, 2007).

Clearly the issue of funding and governance needs immediate attention. The recapitalization of colleges has infused in the college sector a renewed enthusiasm for its skills development responsibilities and the R 1.9 billion once-off capital injection will clearly go a long way in providing much needed infrastructure. There is, however, still a need for sustained funding source.

Historical evidence of the funding of colleges suggests that it is far too underfunded to merit serious consideration. While some increased spending is noted in the period 1999/2000 through 2002/2003 (from R827 million to R979 million), and a proportional spend of 1.48 to 1.75% of total education spend, respectively, the low aggregate-level expenditure suggests very little attention to the sector.

Conclusion

The political space has been opened for FET colleges to take their place in national skills development. The AsgiSA initiative in its 2007 annual report make the following point about education and the role of FET colleges: *“Inadequate education and skills development is one of the six ‘binding constraints’ on accelerated and shared economic growth and development. Education and skills provision are a fundamental responsibility of government... The department has identified the FET colleges sector to expand educational opportunity, preparing young people for the working world in response to intermediate and higher-level skills requirements (RSA, 2007).*

This is further emphasized in various ministerial pronouncements. The Minister of Education is on record as stating: “The FET colleges have taken a central place in the skills development terrain, and we will be expanding our marketing drive to encourage more students to consider education. In addition to this, bursaries have been offered as incentives for ensuring that enrolment is directed at scarce skills. It is anticipated that the objective of training 50 000 artisans in the next three years in order to cope with the increasing demand for technical skills is likely to be realized by these mechanisms.

Clearly, government intends for the sector to take its rightful place as an education and training provider of note. There is an intention to enable colleges to be considered ‘first-choice’ rather than ‘last-chance’ institutions. Arguably, current trends suggest the sector is well on its way to taking its rightful place in the national skills provision agenda, although there is much that still needs to be done. In the vacuum left by the technikon sector, which has been inserted as a component of higher education, colleges can usefully occupy vacant space which will move them from inconsequential position to the forefront of skills provision. The imperatives of AsgiSA and the skills development component, Jipsa, clearly depend on all state organs becoming more involved in skills development.

Promising trends have been noted in the sector – trends which could quite easily be built upon. The potential needs to be accompanied by purposeful action. The challenge for the sector is to manage the inevitable tension that might result as a consequence of working transversally across two ministries with, what appears on the surface as, two quite different mandates. This will not be difficult if both the ministries and colleges understand that they will, after all, be jointly held to account for their role in ensuring the goals of poverty reduction and unemployment which are to be achieved by 2014.

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