

What is to be done [about adult education]? Can it be reborn?

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It is now surely common cause that South African adult education is in a mess. The state's public adult education system run by Departments of Education is thoroughly dysfunctional, ABET provision in industry, whilst it may have profited some commercial providers, has a pitifully inadequate output, and the intellectual support that we would expect to come from universities has been largely smashed by the corporate Philistines now running these institutions (both the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Centre for Adult Education and UNISA's ABET Institute were eviscerated in 2010).

If we had a well behaving schooling system, we could perhaps ignore the problem. But, when the majority of South African adults are uneducated, undereducated and miseducated, adult education is a necessity and required for the achievement of all our development goals.

What can be done about it?

With imagination, quite a lot.

But it does require government to really accept that the official adult basic education and training (ABET) system is not attractive to uneducated and ill-educated adults and has been incompetently managed at both national and provincial levels. It also needs to be accepted that in a situation where the country is awash with unemployed people with varying levels of high school education (including 30% "matric" passes), gaining a formal ABET qualification is of limited utility.

Ten steps

Here are ten suggested steps towards a new plan.

1. The Minister of Higher Education and Training should acknowledge that, as currently constituted, the Directorate of Adult Education in his Department is part of the problem, not the solution. It needs to be bypassed. The Department of Higher Education and Training needs to engage with people with energy who actually know something about adult education and want it to flourish.
2. Rectify the total lack of follow-up to the mid-2008 ministerial committee report on adult education (inadequate as the report was) and hold a genuine all in

consultation with the key actors to plot a way forward.

3. Take emergency action to stop the decimation and asset stripping of the declining university based adult education resources. In particular, what happened to UNISA's ABET Institute should be undone. We need many more university trained adult educators to implement programmes in virtually every field. [Ideally, a dedicated part of the universities budget should be apportioned to adult education units at universities through a virtual national institute for adult education.]
4. The Ministers of Higher and Basic Education should accept that the current formal ABET system run through Public Adult Learning Centres (in schools) is pretty useless. In 2005 the then minister of education, Naledi Pandor, called for a complete "revamp" of the ABET system as it was "utilitarian and narrow" and had "sought to make adults like children... we are teaching schooling." Five years later it still rolls on, directionless. The bottom line is that uneducated and ill-educated adults are not attracted to it. It totally failed to attract graduates of the *Kha Ri Gude* literacy campaign (which really is bad news as literacy needs practice to be retained).
5. Imaginative use should be made of network of learning groups set up by the *Kha Ri Gude* campaign. In a mere two years the campaign had nearly three times the number of learners than the school based ABET system had, every learner had a textbook, and the programme's assessment was nationally checked and moderated. Learners are comfortable meeting in homes, churches and community halls and taught by educators who appear to care. Here is a system that actually seems to work (and has the up to date statistics to prove it). It should be capitalised on. Instead of hoping that its learners will go on to the unattractive school-based classes (which they don't), follow up courses and skills training – community health education, home care, community development, environmental education, etc. and, yes, ABET, should be delivered through this community embedded infrastructure. Other government departments should jump at this opportunity to reach adult learners.
6. The current plans to create a new "adult matric" must be speeded up and high quality materials for it generated. (What can be done by way of rapid yet good quality materials development has recently been illustrated by the workbooks developed by the Department of Basic Education for grades 1 to 6 in literacy and numeracy).
7. A thorough investigation needs to be made of the provision of NQF level 1 qualifications (i.e. ABET) through the SETAs. It is clear that in many cases sub-standard courses have enabled companies to fraudulently meet workplace skills plan goals and benefited scam commercial providers make huge profits. To what extent NQF level 1 courses could also be provided through FET Colleges also needs exploration as this sector develops.

8. Another investigation needs to be made of the plethora of courses for skills development facilitators, assessors and moderators, provided mainly by commercial providers, many of which are utterly fraudulent.
9. Given that millions of people in South Africa have “qualifications” that correspond poorly, if at all, with their actual competence, there will be a need for easily accessible and cheap means of validating competence through various forms of tests. Such availability would in fact simplify and speed up recruitment and employment of the unemployed. Whether provision of such could be done through a state agency or contracted out to bodies such as the Independent Examinations Board should be considered.
10. The total failure of the national ABET directorate to involve the country in the preparations for or follow-up to the UNESCO conference on adult education held in December 2009 in Brazil highlights the fact that South Africa does not seem involved the major international attempts to improve monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for adult education. We cannot know whether adult education is being revived if we do not have ongoing capacity to monitor it (which is also why the collapsing of university adult education capacity is so harmful).

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