
Blade's paper fails to make the cut

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In the tradition of the *Mail & Guardian's* Cabinet report card, we would award a C+ to the green paper on post-school education and training, released last week, for the depth and breadth of its analysis concerning what is wrong with the system.

However, as Marx reminds us, many philosophers have interpreted the world but the point is to change it, and the green paper shows no convincing way of doing that. This is because the changes required to achieve the very ambitious targets for increased enrolment and throughput rates that the document sets out cannot take place within the current neoliberal economic framework, premised as it is on the dominance of the market.

The green paper's intention is to create a policy framework that provides for a post-school education and training system large and diverse enough to cater for all young South Africans, especially the "approximately three million young people between the ages of 18 and 24 who are not accommodated in either the education and training system or the labour market".

The paper provides a detailed description of the post-school education and training landscape as it now looks and suggests ways in which the different types of post-school institutions should be brought into a "single, coherent, differentiated and highly articulated" system.

Research from the Centre for Education Rights and Transformation at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) has pointed out that Higher Education and Training Minister Blade Nzimande began his first term in 2009 with: no proper budget; three million young adults not in employment, education or training; 60% of further education and training (FET) institutions suffering severe funding and debt crises; and a drop-out rate in universities of close to 50%. The green paper acknowledges these and other problems and is, therefore, a welcome departure from the bureaucratic denialism of the recent past.

An appalling event

The paper's release coincides with the tragic death of Gloria Sekwena, the mother of a prospective UJ student. This appalling event highlights the desperate situation millions of students and their families face in dealing with the structural barriers in accessing what should be a fundamental right.

Here too the good intentions of the green paper when it talks of expanding post-school opportunities will resonate with many. Yet, as with the National Policy Commission's "diagnosis" in its national development plan late last year, the paper replicates a well-established track record of the state's -- excelling in identifying problems and producing policies but dismal in implementing them.

Within a context of a world economic recession set to continue in 2012 and, as some economists predict, to be prolonged by the downward drag on growth, incomes and employment, implementation of the green paper's vision will be impossible. The paper falls short of providing an analysis of this "bigger picture" of the context in which we find ourselves -- that is, trapped within a neoliberal paradigm.

Instead, the paper signals Nzimande's adherence to human capital theory, as does his national skills development strategy, which focuses on skilling people for employment and to benefit the needs of business and industry. The idea that somehow "correctly skilling" students will lead to their easily finding employment or becoming self-sufficient is highly problematic -- for instance, the many graduates who sit at home are not simply "incorrectly skilled" but rather innocent bystanders in a world where joblessness has become commonplace.

Consider this...

So we are sceptical about the ambitious targets set out and we raise seven points for consideration.

First, is this document really a green paper? Policies on education and training in the vocational, higher and adult sectors, as well as on skills development, all exist, so should the paper's argument that the various institutions should expand and work more closely together not simply be written up in the form of a plan? Is yet another policy document necessary to effect the ideas raised in this document?

Second, although we agree that FET colleges should be strengthened, because it is imperative to have well-trained technical people in any society, a key weakness in technical vocational education and training (TVET) in these institutions is its narrow

philosophical orientation -- it is instrumental and technicist. Its focus could be much broader, incorporating a more progressive philosophical orientation that recognises TVET as a contributor to democracy and citizenship. Its narrow conception reinforces its separation from academic education and confines it to its "inferior" status -- it remains "education of the hand".

Third, although the training of FET college lecturers requires urgent attention, we caution against training programmes being limited to narrow technical training that emphasises only technique and methods. Both in-service and pre-service curricula should deal with the "bigger picture" -- all college lecturers, for instance, should have a good understanding of globalisation's impact on education and the workplace. Such issues should be part of what all FET college lecturers teach. In this way, students would be able to grapple with real issues that affect their lives, no matter what their vocation.

Fourth, the green paper's idea of establishing a South African institute for vocational and continuing education and training is welcome, but it might be more effective if it consists of provincial institutes based at universities of technology that have close working relations with other higher-education institutions. Provinces could then respond to local, regional and provincial needs.

Fifth, the green paper should seriously consider the establishment of institutes of adult education, given that there are 14-million adults with less than 10 years of schooling and very few well-trained adult educators to support basic education and adult literacy. This is particularly important because of the demise of adult-education units in universities. This need is related to the need for community learning centres and non-formal adult education programmes, which Nzimande has recognised through his appointment of a task team.

Sixth, education remains an important public good. Post-school education and training should strengthen the development of critical citizenship and participatory democracy. This vision of post-schooling should be reinforced, including its contributions to social justice and the advancement of an equitable society. It is therefore important to resource the public institutions rather than to direct funds towards private interests.

Seventh, although the green paper recognises the continuing importance of the humanities, its greater emphasis is still on science and technology. The need for post-schooling to be supported by socially engaged research is imperative because of the enormous socioeconomic problems that continue to plague the South African landscape.

Overall, though, how are the green paper's commendable targets to be achieved within the context of a dwindling revenue base and negligible economic growth? It admits that state funding has not kept up with the rising costs of university education and eloquently spells out the consequences, such as poor throughput rates, declining academic support and overloaded academics.

No guarantee of work

It recognises that post-school education and training may be seen as a way of postponing the problem of high unemployment but assures us that it is underpinned by a sound social and economic rationale. But, if that rationale is merely Gear-lite, the spectre of Tunisia, Egypt and others could soon become a reality in South Africa. It is wrong to continue to pursue social-control mechanisms such as learnerships, military conscription and the "warehousing" or redirection of matriculants into FET colleges if these merely prolong the period a student is in the system without any guarantee of work.

To meet the demands of globalisation and the economy, the restructuring of higher-education institutions reduced their number at a time when access and enrolments were increasing. Moreover, the neo-liberal thinking that dominates the regulatory and financing mechanisms has led to the corporatisation of the higher-education sector, the commodification of knowledge and the neglect of the social sciences and the humanities.

South Africa's African languages, for example, have been victims of this. As much as we support the expansion of the FET sector, the need to increase the number of public universities by more than two is imperative given the size of the South African population.

There is no doubt that post-school education must change. Above all, the disastrous experience of the skills education training authorities, rooted in a neoliberal paradigm, should not be repeated. Change should be based on human need and the needs of our society, not business.

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