

Planning for skills -- again

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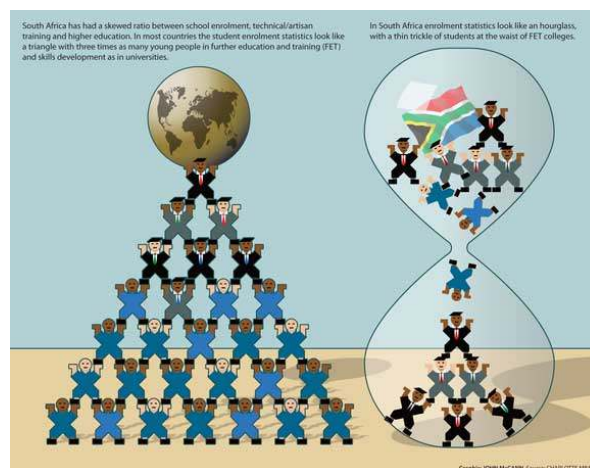
Further education and training (FET) colleges must become the drivers of skills development, according to the National Planning Commission's development plan for the nation, released last month. If, then, an era of skills budgeting dominated by the sector education and training authorities (Setas) is about to close, we need to ask what role these organisations will now play.

There are more than three million young people between the ages of 18 and 24 who are neither employed nor studying. To tackle the need to "improve the skills base through better education and training", the commission's "Vision for 2030" document proposes:

- Developing FET qualifications and a variety of informal programmes;
- Strengthening and expanding the number of colleges and improving the training of the lecturers; and
- Offering adult education in the FET colleges.

For too many years South Africa has had an unwieldy ratio between school enrolments, technical artisan training and higher education. In most countries the student enrolment statistics look like a triangle, with three times as many young people in FET and skills development institutions as in universities. But here it looks like an hourglass, with a thin trickle of students in FET colleges representing the waist.

The result is that South Africa is now short of artisans and in some fields the majority of them are whites in their 50s. The development plan says we need a 40% participation rate of 18 to 24-year-old students in FET colleges, which in today's numbers would mean 1.25-million students instead of the 400 000 we have now, as well as another million in new public community adult centres.



One has to ask why FET colleges have not been more dynamic in the past two decades. Until 2009 skills development fell under the ministry of labour, which transformed the old Manpower Training Act of apartheid days -- with its training councils, apprentices and trade tests -- into the skills arena we now recognise: there is a 1% training levy on employers, 27 Setas (now reduced to 21) and learnership targets as set out in successive national skills development strategies in 1999, 2005 and last year.

Five constituencies contributed to the Nedlac consultations that formulated post-apartheid skills development policy -- the government, organised business, organised labour, provider organisations and community representatives. In the Seta system that followed, employers and labour wrestled with targets and budgets (and each other) and tenders were awarded mostly to private training agencies, some hastily formed for that purpose. They mostly bypassed public training providers, that is, FET colleges, regional training institutes and industry training centres. It was not until 2005 that the government suddenly woke up to the need to revive the FET sector and started to put serious money into recapitalising the colleges and building staff capacity. Where does this leave the Setas?

The plan says they should concentrate on the qualifications needed by businesses -- the levy institutions -- for people working in the sector.

Work experience is vital to skills-development education. In the old days an apprentice's contract, which was with the employer, specified the number of days for which that person would be "released" for education purposes.

The Seta learnerships of today also entail contracts, but these are with the Setas themselves as the contracting power. Learnership money is paid to the employer -- sometimes with surprising setbacks, such as when the employer is a small company and has an overdraft at the bank that swallows the Seta money before the apprentice gets it. In cautious language, the planning commission's national development plan talks about "improving funding modalities and systems ... for what should be funded by the fiscus and what from the levy grant. A single system, with a single funding formula, should incorporate both sources of money."

In the new dispensation's department of higher education and training, money from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme will provide students at FET colleges with loans that will be converted to grants when they complete their qualifications.

Mass adult literacy programme

For emerging business, rural development and adult basic education and training, the National Skills Fund will put money into large agencies such as the Small Enterprise Development Agency, the National Youth Development Agency and Kha Ri Gude (the government's mass adult literacy programme), rather than spreading the money more thinly.

But the problem with the Seta system remains that the planning is in the hands of a supposedly balanced group of representatives of employers and labour, and the figures available to them come from the workplace skills plans submitted by the sector. The quality of these plans depends on skills development facilitators, who work under the eyes of the human resources managers, and the union representatives, who sign off the plans.

But these people are more aware of the training needs of the current employees than of future needs in the sectors, or the needs of the unemployed. In addition, workplace skills plans are often mere form-filling exercises, sometimes hastily completed to catch the deadline for reclaiming levy money. Even the sector skills plans that the Setas produce contain figures of achievable learnership targets sucked from their thumbs. This is especially so in relation to the targets for the unemployed, who are usually so desperate for any money that they will sign up for, say, an early childhood development learnership one year and an HIV caregiver one the next. The plan does propose a way of curbing this learnership-hopping by means of a database linking all forms of grants for the most needy.

There is a need to expand and strengthen Setas, the plan acknowledges. And the national skills development strategy says Setas "play an important role in gathering statistics and other relevant information on labour-market skills needs". But the research capacity of Setas has to be questioned because, unlike universities, they do not have established systems of peer accreditation of research. Who monitors the quality of Seta research? Or is it just assumed that the representatives of labour and levy payers are astute enough in laying out the terms of reference for the research and have the time and incentive to read and critique the research reports?

The third national skills development strategy last year proposed that sector skills plans had to be "professionally researched" and that "sector and nationally commissioned research and data is analysed, validated and captured in an integrated database that is accessible to stakeholders". Now that would be a better guarantee of quality data: if it is fully open to stakeholders, it can be improved and corrected by critique. Likewise, the planning commission commissioned research for its deliberations, tantalisingly referred to in the plan's footnotes. Presumably that research will also be made available?

Because the plan's proposals for national skills development aim to increase employment and strengthen the economy, it is vital to understand the details of how the government plans to achieve this.

As the organ of government now in charge of skills development, the higher education and training department embarked on a public roll-out of the third national skills development strategy, starting with a three-month roadshow in KwaZulu-Natal launched last month. We will need to assess how successful that turns out to be -- South Africa cannot afford another decade of botched skills development.

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