

From PALCs to Community Colleges

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On 11 January 2013 South Africa's Department of Higher Education and Training issued a white paper on post school education and training that outlined future policy for higher education, technical and vocational education and adult education in the context of political and economic imperatives to continue to enlarge intake in universities, expand the technical and vocational education and training system, and further centralize national government's control of post school education.

In the period since 1994 there had been a number of significant moves in this direction. With higher education there had been new legislation that made government appointee dominated councils a much more controlling influence and there had been a set of university mergers (of somewhat dubious rationale and benefit) and enormous increase in student funding necessitated by the massification of a student intake with new demographic characteristics. With Further Education and Training¹ there was a drastic merger process and a recapitalization of a sector that was about half that of higher education (in defiance of the common assumption in most of the world that it should be the other way round) and finally a constitutional amendment that placed FET colleges and Adult Learning Centres firmly under national not provincial control. Finally, there was an attempt to conceptualise a new institutional form to replace the dysfunctional and poorly funded and managed system of Public Adult Learning Centres that had operated since 1977.

In this paper I wish to present an account of the policies, programmes, outcomes (and associated bureaucratic machinations) of the attempts to run, reform and reconstitute the state funded Public Adult Learning Centre system, which is now, since 1 April 2015 – April Fools Day – a system (though only nominally) of community colleges.

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Because South Africa has compulsory schooling only up to grade 9, in terms of South Africa's National Qualification Framework terminology, **further education** includes both conventional secondary level schooling as well as post school education and training (at less than university level). This causes some confusion when comparisons are made with developed countries where further education is a term applied only to post school education and training.

The Public Adult Learner Centre system

The expiry of the Public Adult learning Centre system

The reform and reconstitution of post-school education and training

The Further Education and Training White Paper of 1998 heralded a nationally driven merger that by 2002 saw 151 colleges into 51 larger, multi-campus institutions which had more autonomy and delegated budgetary authority. The merger certainly addressed the historical legacy of the same districts having four or more parallel institutions that previously served the separate apartheid era “race” groups, and of the distinction between state and state-aided institutions, but it also led to the closure of smaller institutions that had operated (though sometimes not very well) in rural areas. The capacity to manage these larger merged colleges was, however, often lacking (Gewe and Morojele, 2014)

Subsequent reforms included the recapitalisation of the declining Further Education and Training college sector from 2005 to 2008 that sought to address infrastructural, resource and capacity challenges, legislation in 2006 that transferred the staff of FET colleges to employment by college councils, and the provision of bursaries for college students through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), and a new National Certificate (Vocational). Enrolments in the colleges expanded significantly and there were gradual signs of improved academic performance (though from a very low base).

In 2011 the national Department of Education split into two: the Department of Basic Education (DBE) (which now dealt only with schooling at General and Further Education levels) and the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) (which dealt with post-school education and training, which included formal adult education at General and Further Education levels). An anomaly was that the Kha Ri Gude adult literacy campaign remained in the Department of Basic Education.

It became clear that the responsibility for the FET Colleges would shift to the national government, to the DHET, and legislation, including a necessary constitutional amendment, led to the so-called function shift occurred on 1 April 2015 when the staff and assets and budgets of the 51 colleges, now renamed Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges, moved from the jurisdiction of the nine provinces to the DHET.

Policies for the reconstitution of post-school education and training

The changes to the FET colleges were just one component of a broader set of new policies and plans for the post-school education and training which included some attention being given to adult education as well.

In 2012 a ***Green Paper for Post-School Education and Training*** was published by the DHET. It had a small section a small section on Community Education and Training Centres which it proposed as a replacement for the Public Adult Learning Centres. The green paper noted the inadequacy of provision for people who had failed to complete their schooling. It noted that a task team was looking at a new institutional set up (see below).

The *White Paper* that followed (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013) recommended energetic development planning for the expansion of post-school provision for youth and a large number of adults. It outlined the DHET's focus and strategies for post-school education and training in a set of institutions making up "a coherent but differentiated whole" that could expand to meet the needs of youth (there were 3.4 million young people not in employment, education or training (the so-called NEETs)) but also a large number of adults". There should be articulation between various qualifications and no dead-ends, and partnerships between educational institutions and employers. Though it saw national economic development as the priority it also aimed to develop "thinking citizens" – education had an the "intrinsic importance".

The White Paper included a brief section (pp. 20-24) proposing core-funded and well-staffed Community Colleges (which would cluster the Public Adult Learning Centres) and expand provision nearly 400%. They would offer education and training, formal and non-formal, for community needs, literacy and citizenship education, not only income generation.

Community colleges "must therefore be designed to be flexible in meeting the needs of their own particular communities. The colleges must build on the experiences and traditions of community and people's education developed by non-formal, community-based and non-governmental organisations over many decades." They would be monitored and evaluated by a division within a new South African Institute for Vocational Education and Training.

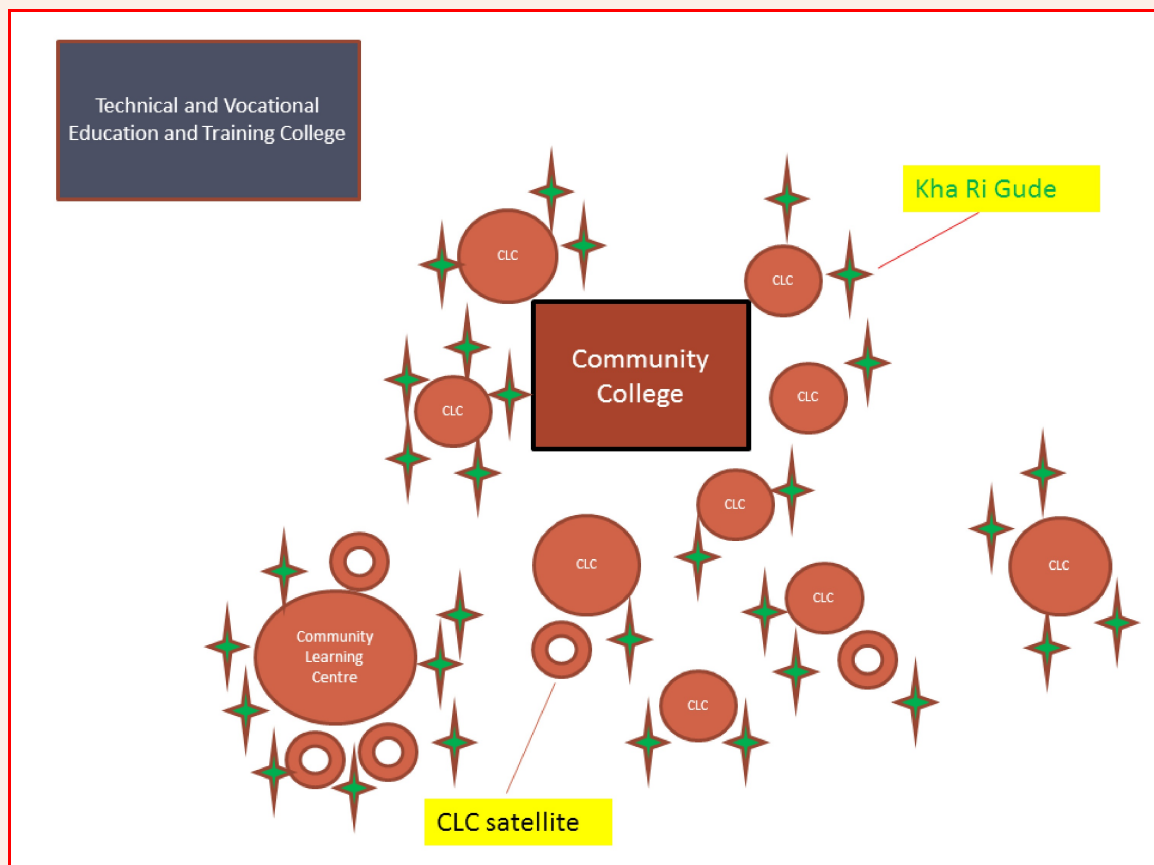
The Task Team on Community Education and Training Centres

The White Paper's position on Community College development had been informed by (though in certain crucial respects it differed from) the report of a Task Team set up by the Minister of Higher Education and Training in 2011 as part of the Green paper development process to look at the future of Community Education and Training Centres (that is, the old PALCs) and to conceptualise a workable institutional model of community education and training centres that is distinct and unique. It was also tasked with looking at the policy, legal, programmes, funding, governance and broad implementation aspects of its proposals.

Its mid-2012 reports contextual analysis noted that despite some achievements the South African education system continued to reproduce inequalities in educational access and outcomes, that there was a huge mass of 12 million severely undereducated adults and 3 million NEETs between the ages of 18 and 24. State adult education had received a minuscule percentage of the education budget and little attention was given to the young NEETs. This situation had been exacerbated by a period of fiscal restraint until the mid 2000s.

The actual proposals were as follows:

- A network rather than a single ‘new’ institution
- The network would be an integral part of the post school system
- It would have two major components:
 - ▶ **Community Learning Centres (and their smaller satellites):**
(with the Kha Ri Gude literacy campaign infrastructure, matured into a national learning network (with some similarities to the Scandinavian study circles), linked to them
 - ▶ **Community Colleges** (within a differentiated college sector) as support hubs for the Community Learning Centres clustered around them)
- ▶ Support from an Institute for Adult, Youth and Community Learning (not merely a sub-section a TVET Institute)
- ▶ Open, distance and e-learning components in all of these institutions.
- ▶ There would be strong links to the TVET college system.
- ▶ There might be a pilot phase in which the model was tested but the aim was for a community college in every district of the country.



The decision to not recommend having “community colleges” as sub-sections of existing TVET colleges was based on the rationale that when adult education is tagged onto another system it is invariably neglected and that expecting weak and overloaded TVET colleges to take on the task of mothering a weak, understaffed and dysfunctional PALC system that

served thoroughly under-prepared learners was too much to expect. [In retrospect, financial exigencies may query the realism of this recommendation.]

The Task team saw the work of these Community College/Community Learning Centres as focussing on the following:

NQF level	Institution	Mission	Programmes
1 to 3	Community Learning Centres	First and second chance literacy and vocational	ABET, soft vocational skills, GETC, NASCA, some CLCs focus on hard vocational skills and NCV, community and non-formal education, <i>Kha Ri Gude</i> learning network programmes
1 to 5	<i>Kha Ri Gude</i> Learning Network	Literacy and public education	Literacy, public and community education [Multi-ministry delivery]
4 to 5	Community colleges	First, second chance Senior Certificate. Vocational and occupational programmes	NASCA, NC(V), soft vocational skills, social learnership, para-professional programmes, university bridging
	Adult, Youth and Community Learning Institute	Develop and support literacy, adult education, community and public learning	Policy, Curriculum, virtual collaboration mechanism

The Task Team report urged urgent attention to:

- Phasing in the model(s) and sites of delivery
- Institutional development and capacity building
- Governance issues
- Legal and policy framework
- Funding
- Linkages and articulation

The White Paper take on Community Colleges

The White Paper certainly took the need for more flexible provision seriously. Community Colleges “must therefore be designed to be flexible in meeting the needs of their own particular communities. The colleges must build on the experiences and traditions of community and people’s education developed by non-formal, community-based and non-governmental organisations over many decades.” However, the main focus was on the new institutional type and there was little reference to what was to be done with the PALCs in the

interim. The White Paper said that the PALCs, now that they were the DHET responsibility, would be clustered into the new community colleges. Community Learning Centres. Community colleges would be provided with “adequate infrastructure and a critical mass of full-time staff” and could enter into partnerships with community-owned, private or church run education and training centres. There would be a pilot phase. Learner support and career guidance services to be established, as would Youth Advisory centres. The DHET would develop funding formulae with core funding to be complemented by Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA), National Skills Fund and private monies. Colleges could charge fees but they should be kept to minimum. As far as possible students were to be “fully funded”. The Community Colleges would be monitored and evaluated by a division within a new South African Institute for Vocational Education and Training.

Colleges “must select suitable and qualified adult educators” and new ones trained and older ones retrained. There would be qualifications policy and guidelines for “the recognition of capacities and experience that exist within communities”.

And, echoing a strong recommendation from the Task team, “Universities – and TVET colleges where appropriate – will be supported to develop capacity to train adult educators. Many university-based adult-education units have unfortunately been closed in the past two decades. However, at least two universities have established centres for post-school studies. This is an important development which should be encouraged. Such centres could become hubs for training adult educators and promoting articulation in the post school sector, as well as becoming nuclei for research on the sector.” (p. 23).

On the initial implementation there would:

- Phased introduction after 9 pilots (one per province)
- Principals to be appointed by the DHET Councils will have: ministerial appointments, community, local government, local business, other post-school institutions
- Development of long term plan
- Phased expansion and improvement of infrastructure
- DHET to oversee clustering of PALCs

On programmes there was reference to a mix of the current formal PALC offerings (the General Education and Training Certificate and the Senior Certificate) and the new National Senior Certificate for Adults (NASCA) as well as to various occupational and non-formal programmes and courses. There would be community responsiveness and citizen and social education.

Much of the above is, perhaps predictably for a policy document, aspirational. What would happen in subsequent implementation was far away from these aspirations.

The function shift decisions

Before the Task Team report was finalised or the White Paper published, the DHET legal advisor appraised the Task Team of a plan to rename all PALCs as Community colleges, then immediately merge them into 9 (provincial/regional) ones. This was to give effect to the “function shift” of the PALCs from provincial to national control.

The Task Team was aghast at this proposal as there was a clear need to phase in over time the clustering of PALCs, their rationalisation and linking to local community colleges and attempts made to improve their effectiveness. This would be a difficult task given the lack of capacity endemic in the PALCs and their management. It was clear that there were no resources to immediately set up new community colleges and the Task Team saw this as a recipe for disaster, the only beneficiaries being the bureaucrats who could, by a legal sleight of hand, claim a successful “function shift. Further they thought it was wrong to mechanically apply the existing TVET college governance model. Their objections were totally ignored and the bureaucratically convenient but otherwise totally illogical process went ahead on 31 March/1 April in terms of Amendments to the Further Education and Training Colleges Act in late 2013.

Predictably there were enormous administrative problems, particularly with payments to PALC staff, and it general seemed that there was great lack of clarity as to who was actually responsible for ongoing support to the PALCs, given that there were in fact no new community colleges (see below).

The Community College Policy Design Evaluation

Bizarrely, while the planning for the “function shift” was going on and, actually on 1 April 2015 happening, another arm of government, in the form of the Department of Performance Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) in the Presidency had, with the DHET, commissioned an evaluation of the design of the draft Policy on Community Colleges (which was in tardy internal process of development within the Adult Education Directorate within the DHET – exceptionally tardy in that it was now two years since the Task team Report). Such an evaluation was in the way a pilot of what would in future happen to all government policies in the course of their development. It was just happening rather late in the day with the function shift of the PALCs already steamrolling ahead.

In the process of the evaluation it was discovered, amongst other things, that there had been very little consultation with the PALCs about their to be overnight status as a full community college before waking up to find one was merged into a single regional college, which was not, actually a college (even a nascent one) at all, but simply an administrative centre for (continuing) to administer the PALCs (now renamed Community Learning Centres). Further the staff of the previous provincial adult education directorates, now transferred to the national DHET had not the slightest intention of now going to work in the new institutional model of the community college!

The evaluation (South African Institute of Distance Education, 2015) was finalised in August 2015.

Its conclusions were (pp. 4-6), first, in respect of the “function shift” that:

- Whilst it is acknowledged that the PALC system is largely dysfunctional there is little in the draft policy that indicates a detailed plan or process to improve the situation to ensure that these centres become functional. Indeed the plan to nominally consolidate PALCs into one community college may actually replicate all the problems of the past system, particularly in the larger provinces where little district or local support was

given to these centres. The model may also disadvantage those PALCs that in certain provinces are functioning well and are supported by district or regional officials. The lack of budget estimates was alarming, suggesting a likelihood of funding shortages. The lack of buy in from officials was also worrying and the danger of the concept of “community college” being associated in the public mind with what is in effect simply the old dysfunctional PALC model renamed will severely undermine the potential of an inspirational educational development.

- The evaluators recommended that there needs to be a differentiated conceptualization of how the merged PALCs are meant to operate in different provincial contexts. It is known for example that Gauteng was administratively more successful than other provinces and has a fairly large adult education staff. A more comprehensive policy and plan must be developed that deals with the ongoing (even if only interim) existence and support of youth and adult learners currently at the old PALC sites. Key outcome, performance indicators, and sectoral coordination structures must be detailed. This is not to be confused with the policy and plan for the new institutional form of community colleges.

On the new institutional form the evaluation noted:

- The lack of the necessary detailed plan on how to set up a community college system, and, where detail is given, it slavishly follows the TVET college model. The Task team notion of a more flexible network of community learning centres close to the learners has been entirely lost or inverted. There also appears to have been minimal consultation on the new policy and little attention given to how the new system would be funded. Given that new programmes, curriculum and materials development will be crucial to improve the provision, the absence of any proposal of an appropriate mechanism to facilitate the development of these crucial elements, is extremely serious.
- The evaluators recommended a more substantive and imaginative policy be developed that deals with the creation and sustainable continuation of a new institutional form of provision of adult and youth education in decentralised community learning centres supported by community colleges, and with the requisite resources of programmes, curricula, materials and educators and trainers. This policy process should commence with the development of a set of guidelines for the pilot community colleges, including the notion that they should incorporate a number of local community learning centres (PALCs, satellites or NGO Centres). Then the current legislation should be reviewed and where necessary amended or replaced. This should in no way interfere with initiation of genuine pilots of community colleges. Further the DHET would need to establish significant internal capacity to do all this and also ensure that the crucial South African Institute for Vocational and Continuing Education and Training (SAIVCET) functions are made operational, especially in regard to programme and materials development. A detailed project plan should be developed with an accompanying monitoring and evaluation framework.

The ongoing process

Current there is a Ministerial Committee busy looking at how TVET colleges and Community Colleges will be funded. It will report in the New Year of 2016. Internally the DHET has a group developing a strategic plan.

As yet, there are no community colleges, though some Council members have been appointed and at the Community College Administrative Centres one, or in an exceptional case, two, people sit in an office. On 10 October an agreement was signed that certain TVET colleges would handle all procurement for the yet to be Community College [Administrative Centres]. Most PALCS have not had a single communication from the new bodies of which they are supposed now to be sup-structures.

Out in the townships and rural communities PALCs still run, much as they always have, though perhaps more in the dark as to who is actually in charge.

Will the numbers in PALCs/Community Colleges increase from about a quarter of a million to a million (a 377% increase) by 2030?

The struggle for better adult education for South Africa clearly continues.

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