

A justification for the IEB's commitment to adult education

Introduction

Though the origin of the Independent Examinations Board was prompted by the desire to fill the void left by the demise of the Joint Matric Board examination, adult education was on its agenda from the first. This commitment was reinforced by the prominence that provision of adult basic education played in the demands of COSATU and the ANC in the pre-transition and initial post-1994 period. Adult Basic Education indeed was one of the foremost projects that moulded the development of the National Qualifications Framework and the South African Qualifications Authority. The insertion of adult basic education into the 1996 Constitution's Bill of Rights is the apogee of this rise of commitment to the rights of adults to a basic education.

It is now common cause that a range of factors have led to a decline in such commitment to adult basic education both by government (whose handling of education in general has been dismal and of adult education derisory, except in the case of the *Kha Ri Gude* adult literacy campaign) and of business and industry: a lacklustre economy hammered by both internal and external blows and high unemployment have meant that the demand for adult basic education for employees declined.

The situation now arises where the Independent Examinations Board may find itself incurring losses if it continues to provide examinations for adult learners at prices affordable to the market. The IEB needs to be able to justify its continued activity in the assessment of adult learning.

Justifications for examinations for adult learners

Before looking at the justifications for involvement in adult education *per se*, one must make a rational judgement that examinations for adult learners are a good thing – the counter view would be that for adults there is no need for certification and that any learning they undertake could be non-formal or informal. The reality is that certification is increasingly important, not only for young people seeking entrance into further or higher education or the job market, but for adults of any age. This stress on certification is exacerbated by the large number of unemployed work seekers.

The only other position against certification of knowledge or skill is the one of nepotism, where you get appointed or promoted on the basis of who you know (and have multiple ties to). Whatever the position's strengths (and it does have some, notably that it recognises that employment is not just about work but also about emotional and ideological ties – it is about such things as loyalty and trust and the power that inheres in these emotions and values), its weaknesses are proneness to corruption and its total inadequacy in the current global context of rapid mobility and the growth of universal, but necessarily decontextualised, standards in education and training.

Justifications for involvement in adult education

There are three main justifications for involvement in adult (and particularly adult basic) education:

- Adult education as a right
- Adult education as a key to development
- Adult education as a route to employment and decent jobs

Access to adult education as a rights issue

While access to educational opportunities for adults is both a Constitutional and human rights issue, this approach has never really been taken seriously in South Africa. Though a large number of court challenges have been made about the rights of children to education, as far as is known not a single court case has charged the state for failing to deliver adult basic education to those requesting it.

Though it is only a moral rather than a legal imperative, the IEB could be seen as needing to respond to this imperative, enshrined as it is in our Constitution.

Adult education as a development issue

Adult education is taken as a key factor in development in a number of recent United Nations and UNESCO statements. In the South African context adult learning should be thought of as an important part of creating the National Development Plan's 'virtuous cycle' that would help re-activate a stagnant economy.

The United Nations declaration ***Transforming our world: the 2030 agenda for sustainable development*** (United Nations, 2015) will have a profound impact on development (including adult education) over the next decade and a half. Adult education is anchored in Sustainable Development Goal 4 – “To ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all) – subsections 4.3, 4.4, 4.5 4.6 4.7:

- 4.3 By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university
- 4.4 By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship
- 4.5 By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations
- 4.6 By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy
- 4.7 By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development

Goal 4 explicitly identifies adults as learners and proposes some specific adult education related targets. In this it reflects the priorities of the UNESCO ***Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education***, another of the important documents that came out in 2015, which recognises adult education in formal, non-formal and informal modes.

The other important UNESCO document, the ***Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action*** specifies in more detail what Sustainable Development Goal 4 means for education (including adult education). It pays some attention to assessment in relation to ABET in its indicative strategies which include the following (p.48)

- Ensure that literacy and numeracy programmes are of high quality according to national evaluation mechanisms, tailored to learners' needs and based on their previous knowledge and experience. This requires paying close attention to culture, language, social and political relationships and economic activity, with particular attention to girls and women and vulnerable groups, and linking and integrating such programmes with skills development for decent work and livelihood as essential elements of lifelong learning.
- Scale up effective adult literacy and skills programmes involving civil society as partners, building on their rich experience and good practice.
- Develop a literacy assessment framework and tools to evaluate proficiency levels based on learning outcomes. This will require defining proficiency across a range of contexts, including skills at work and in everyday life.
- Establish a system to collect, analyse and share relevant and timely data on literacy levels and literacy and numeracy needs, disaggregated by gender and other indicators of marginalization.

An important statement on the importance of improving South African adult education provision is the estimate by Gustafsson *et al* (2010, p.4:

if the quality of schooling in South Africa were where it should be (at a level befitting a middle income country), GDP would be R550 billion higher than it currently is, or 23% above the current level. ... poor quality schooling at the primary level, which increases adult illiteracy in future decades, is undoubtedly a large, and arguably the largest, inhibitor of South Africa's growth and development.

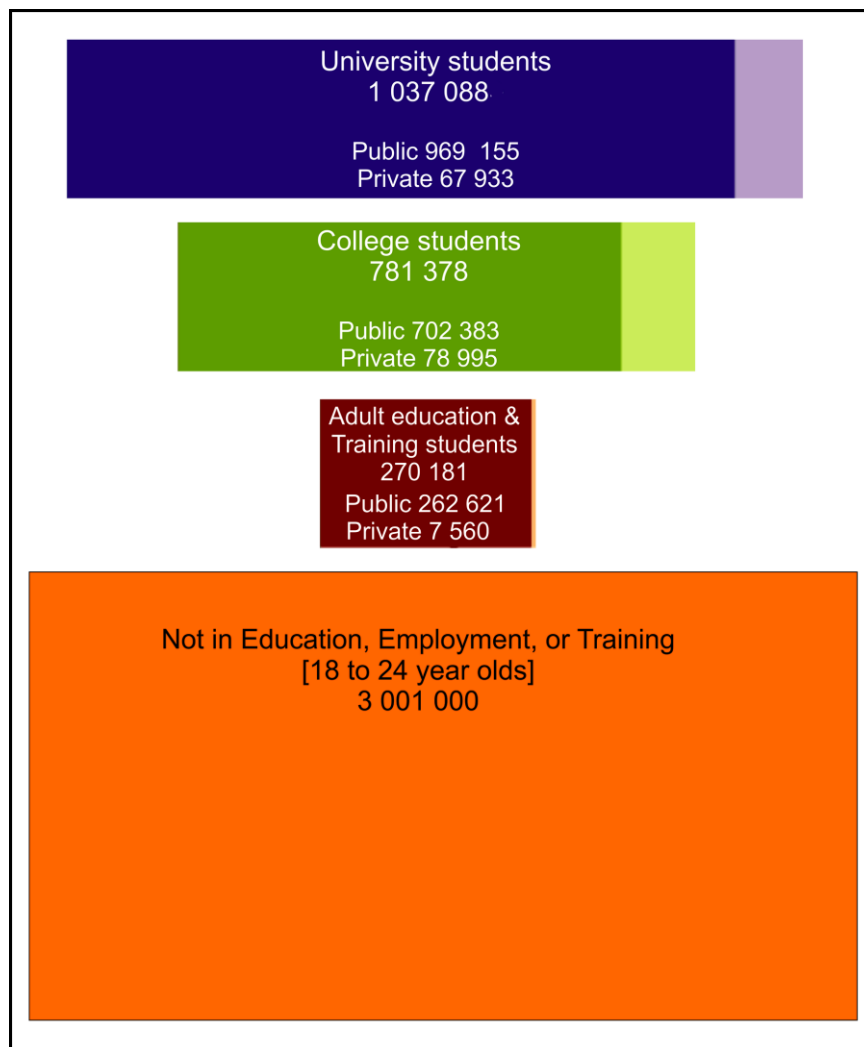
It can be argued that the IEB should try and gain access to international development funding to assist in this development supportive work.

Access to adult education as an employment creation and advancement issue

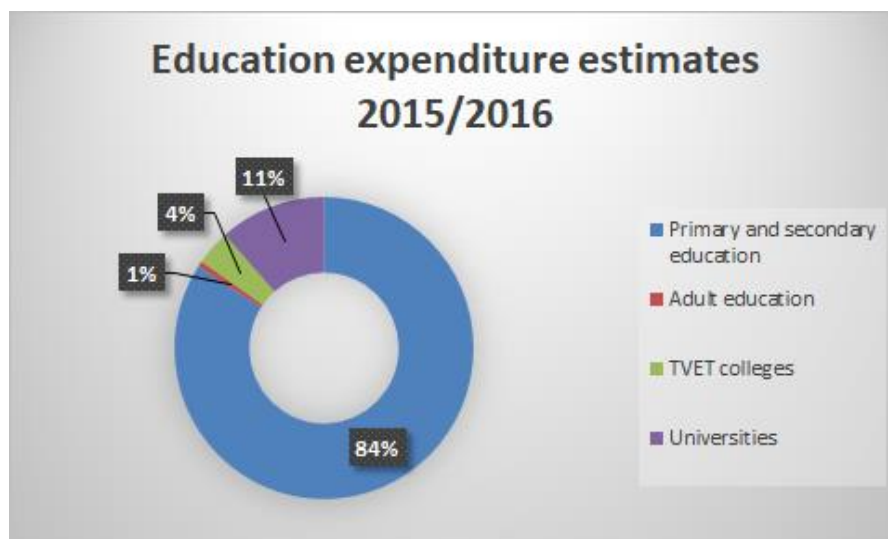
Access to new opportunities to learn in South Africa has to be viewed in the context of unemployment having hit an all-time high in this country. The people who are most vulnerable, but also the largest drain on the public fiscus, are ones who are trapped in situations with high levels of poverty and low levels of education. This group of people also have the fewest resources – personal or financial – to draw upon.

The extent of this problem, and also an indication of how misaligned public resources are to address it, is shown in the following diagrams (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2017, pp. 52, 60):

Shape of the Post-school Education and Training System in South Africa, 2014



The proportions of the public education budget given to each component reflect even more strongly this abnormal shape:



With even more young people drawn into “fee-free” university education, funded as it is by monies drawn from what was meant to be vocational and skills training, this situation is not likely to improve in the short term. Yet a country the majority of whose people cannot form part of its resources is not sustainable. Ways of bringing as many people as possible into the economy must form part of future thinking – and money cannot only be allocated to a small elite at the top end of the education ladder (a current example of which is the billions of rand already redirected to university students as a result of the “Fees Must Fall” protests and the astronomic top up amount proposed recently to make all universities fee free – R40 billion – which is 2 000 per cent higher than the entire current state allocation to adult education).

Arguments in the past have been that some form of occupational training is the answer to returning people into the workforce, but offering short-term training and low level contract such as Working with Water and Working with Fire simply alleviates immediate suffering without providing a way forward that encourages the re-awakening of individual agency or hope.

Occupational training is more expensive than other forms of adult learning and on education that is focused on literacy and numeracy and the acquisition of a broader understanding of oneself and the world. While not a direct solution to the South African/African/global unemployment crisis, adult learning and education re-opens doors that were shut previously, has the potential to positively influence the literacy levels of upcoming generations, forms part of the pushback against domestic violence and crime, and has a positive influence on health matters also. All of these issues are ones that impact deeply on the lives of the poorest and least educated in this country, and which tie up huge financial resources.

It is therefore imperative to make a case to the state that the allocation to adult learning cannot be allowed to wither as it has in the past five years or more. Money can and must be allocated to advocacy of adult learning, the training of qualified teachers and access to learning and assessment for those wishing to help themselves, their children and ultimately the economy.

Ensuring the quality and recognition of such adult learning is crucial. And this is the role that the IEB has expertise and a proven track record in.

The two formal adult education qualifications

Two qualifications for adults have been registered and are waiting for full delivery – the General Education and Training Certificate for Adults (GETCA) and the National Senior Certificate for Adults (NASCA) – which have the potential to service the many millions who need some hope for their future and are willing to spend their time on enabling themselves through learning.

The approach that IEB has taken already – namely to support the DHET in paying some attention to the area of adult education and development – should be continued.

An IEB proposal that it could be responsible for the setting of the NASCA exams on behalf of the DHET could be a spearhead of a broader adult education initiative.

Experience in Asia suggests that there are large funding resources, e.g. via the European Union, or individual donor countries (e.g. Switzerland, Germany), that could be mobilised through Department of Higher Education projects – such projects could build national capacity in the adult learning and education field. Perhaps an organization like JET Education Services could be approached to think possibilities of this sort through with the IEB board?

The IEB enters as a NPO that provides expertise, direction and support to the national/ international project should be considered.

Another possible expansion route for adult assessment

Given that it is common cause that much schooling in South Africa is ineffective and that millions of young South Africans are extruded from the education system with a severe lack of basic competency in reading, writing, mathematics and general knowledge, even though they may have some sort of certification.

In the higher reaches of education, we know that the value of education qualifications is usually judged by potential employers on the basis of the reputation of the school or higher education institution where the person studied. However, for employers seeking candidates with real potential in the lower levels of employment there are currently no standard quick means to do basic testing of competency.

It is possible that there may be a market for such (possibly online) tests where employers have to select candidates from a large pool of job seekers.

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