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FET Institute
University of the Western Cape

The Hard Work of Soft Skills: Securing Job Placements for Technical and Vocational Education and Training College Graduates

The vocational-education-to-employment-system can be seen as a highway, where three drivers – educators, employers and young people – all want to get to the same destination at the same time (effective, high quality employment that benefits individuals, business and ultimately society). However, without taking each other into account while navigating this road, the likelihood of arriving at such a juncture is greatly diminished. Recent government policies, namely the 'White Paper on Post-School Education and Training' and the 'Human Resource Development Strategy' (HRDS), stress the need for public Technical and Vocational and Training (TVET) colleges¹ to strengthen relationships with the workplace in order to improve students' chances of employment. This, according to the Department of Higher Education and Training, will require close relationships between colleges and employers so that learners can acquire the work experience they need to complete their vocational qualifications.

However, at the same time public TVET colleges are struggling to overcome their racialised history and the negative stereotyping associated with vocational education. Currently there are 50 multi-site colleges with about 260 campuses spread across the nine provinces of South Africa. Government has invested heavily in transformation initiatives over the last 15 years, and the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) now

allocates a substantial amount of bursary funding to college students. Enrolments are set to increase from approximately 650 000 students at present, to 2.5 million by 2030.

The Further Education and Training Institute (FETI) recently instigated research to investigate the links between skills gaps identified by employers, and the curricula offered at some Western Cape Further Education and Training (FET) colleges. This research was conducted in order to enable the development and piloting of a programme that strengthens these links, where they exist, and that develops a pathway for college graduates into identified industries. The project divided into three phases and is called the 'College to Work' project.

In this learning brief we provide feedback on the three phases of the project and what has been learned thus far. The brief includes a discussion of the complexity of linking supply and demand issues for employment of college graduates; a short report-back on the research that was conducted; the details of the programme that was subsequently developed; and early results of the piloting phase.

Phase 1:

Phase 1 of the project was concerned with identifying employment needs within the Western Cape Province and establishing the

¹ Previously called Further Education and Training (FET) Colleges

feasibility of linking employers and FET colleges within targeted economic sectors, with a view to creating pathways for college graduates into employment opportunities. Phase 1 resulted in the identification of three economic sectors most likely to employ college graduates: Tourism and Hospitality, Engineering and Wholesale and Retail. It also revealed the complexity of linking supply and demand issues for employment of college graduates:

What is helping:

- Policy requirements: The fact that around three million of our youth between the ages of 18-25 are unemployed and not in education or training is seen as a crisis that cannot be addressed by government alone². A keyword in policy documents is therefore ‘partnerships’ across civil society, business, public and private entities. TVET colleges have been given a clear brief in the White Paper to prepare learners for employment or for self-employment. The White Paper goes further in calling on Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) to play a facilitating role in bringing colleges and employers together by actively seeking work opportunities for college graduates. The creation of the Department of Higher Education

and Training (DHET) in 2009 resulted in Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA)s, TVET Colleges and Adult Education institutions being included with higher education institutions in the new department. This has enabled the DHET to mandate SETAs to fund public education and training institutions as well as private providers.

- Transformation initiatives: It is recognised that efforts will need to be intensified in order to make TVET colleges ‘institutions of first choice’ for young learners. In this regard there are plans to expand college provision, review curricula, increase student support efforts, professionalise college teaching and so on.
- PIVOTAL (Professional, Vocational, Technical and Academic Learning) grants can be accessed for supporting learners in the workplace. Pivotal grants were introduced in 2013 and are discretionary funds from the Skills Levy funds paid by employers. SETAs need to allocate 80% of their discretionary funds as Pivotal grants that result in qualifications or part qualifications for learners on the National Qualifications Framework. PIVOTAL funds can be used to support an internship in the workplace and is particularly applicable to students with National Technical Education (NATED) Level 6 (N6 qualifications) as they require an internship period of 18-24 months in order to be awarded

NCV and NATED Courses Explained

National Certificate Vocational - NCV	NATED Courses
<p>Since January 2007, The National Certificate Vocational (NCV) replaced the National Technical Education (NATED) (N1-N3) at public FET Colleges. The NCV not only gives grade 9 students an alternative to an academic grade 10-12, but also gives students, who have already passed grades 10-12, the opportunity to obtain a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) level 2-4 industry related qualification.</p> <p>The programmes of study are offered in 11 vocational fields e.g. marketing, management, education, development and more.</p> <p>What can you do with an NCV level 4?</p> <p>You can be admitted into selected tertiary/university institutions as it should be recognised as an equivalent to National Senior Certificate/Grade 12. However, universities do require higher pass marks in the NCV subjects and you should check that NCV courses are recognised by the university. You can continue to complete a NATED course and receive a Diploma.</p> <p>Minimum Admission Requirements: Grade 9</p>	<p>The NATED courses (N4-N6) consists of 18 months of theory based study and another 18 months of practical application in a work environment. NATED courses offer students the opportunity to earn a Diploma in their field of study.</p> <p>What can you do with a N6 Diploma?</p> <p>You can work for any employer in your field of study or you can study further at university.</p> <p>Minimum Admission Requirements: N3, Grade 12 or NCV level 4. In some cases RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning) does provide an alternative route to the NATED programmes.</p>

² Perold H., Cloete N. and Papier, J. (2012), “Shaping the Future of South Africa’s Youth”, pp.1-6.

a National Diploma (see table following for an explanation of NCV and NATED courses).

their learners has been a serious impediment for colleges.

What is hindering:

- Skeptical employers: The insufficient practical work experience offered at colleges adds to the negative perception of college education by business.
- During our investigation we were also made starkly aware of the realities of the economic recession, with employers being reluctant to commit to longer term employment of TVET College graduates even though they were receptive to affording them some work experience.
- In spite of some goodwill, employers were concerned that the PIVOTAL grant, while promising, was not yet operational in some sectors. There was a perception that they might struggle to obtain it, leaving student interns at risk of not receiving any financial support.
- TVET Colleges face legislative issues in their efforts to obtain workplace experience for their graduates. All students undertaking N6 courses are required to complete 18 months or 24 months of workplace experience before they can be awarded a TVET College Diploma. Without work experience students will only qualify with an N6 certificate. However, workplace legislation (e.g. Compensation for Occupational Injuries and Diseases Act) only applies to employees of a company, thus under current legislation there would not be financial or medical cover for the student if they are injured in the workplace. The issue of insurance for college learners who are not full-time employees or learnership candidates is a disincentive for interested employers.
- The lack of work placement opportunities for

Phase 2:

In Phase 2 employers in the three selected sectors were consulted with regard to their prior knowledge of, and interactions with TVET colleges and their graduates, to ascertain their views on what would enhance the employability of college graduates within their sector. Employers were also asked to comment on future employment prospects in their companies and possible placements for college graduates.

The Hard Work of Soft Skills

Ten employers within each industry sector were identified and in-depth interviews conducted (30 interviews in total, see breakdown in the table below). Interviews covered the potential capacity of the company to employ new college graduates, as well as the criteria/attributes/skills/knowledge that companies considered necessary for entry-level employment.

What is needed from students – according to employers:

Attitude

- Engineering: All engineering firms raised attitudinal skills as a key factor for employability. It was mentioned that apprenticeship in the engineering sector remained “old fashioned” and that issues of “respect, neatness, presentation and punctuality” are very important. Honesty was also cited as an important ethic as well as having sufficient humility to admit to making a mistake. It was also important that new

Industries represented in interviews within targeted sectors

Engineering Sector	Wholesale and Retail	Hospitality
Automotive (2)	Food/grocery retailers (4)	Hotels (7)
Manufacturing (7)	Medium sized fashion retail stores (3)	Other industry related organisations and forums (3)
Electrical (1)	Suppliers in building and construction (2)	
	Media company (1)	
Total (10)	Total (10)	Total (10)

employees should demonstrate a passion for the work they are involved in.

- **Hospitality:** Attitudinal skills were similarly important within the hospitality industry as is illustrated by the following comments from employers:
 - ▶ “Give me someone with the right attitude – the rest I can teach”
 - ▶ “Attitude is critical in this industry”
 - ▶ “We employ personalities, the skill can be trained”
 - ▶ “A skill can be taught, attitude cannot.”
- **Wholesale and Retail:** Attitudinal skills were also seen as paramount for the wholesale and retail industry. Skills mentioned were professionalism, good communication and interaction with customers, solutions focused, time management, conflict management, and problem solving, to name a few. Self-discipline and self-management skills were also viewed as important personal development skills.

Practical and academic skills

- **Engineering:** The majority of engineering firms interviewed required Mathematics, Science and English at Grade 12 level with an N3 or N4 qualification in order to be employed on an artisan pathway. Most companies make use of psychometric testing that includes diagnostic skills and motor coordination/dexterity skills to assess new entrants. It was mentioned that students frequently failed these internal tests and companies resented the fact that they were required to provide training on mathematical and scientific concepts that should be covered with college training. They were also concerned that the National Certificate Vocational (NCV) did not provide students with enough practical skills and experience. Similar concerns were raised about students who had NATED theoretical qualifications, although it was noted that some of these students had received workshop hand-tool skills as part of their college training.
- **Hospitality:** Hospitality firms are firmly located within the service sector industry and place significant emphasis on attitudinal skills, although foundational academic qualifications and specific occupational qualifications are necessary to access employment in this sector. Practical skills are valued but are not a prerequisite as these skills are taught on an

on-going basis within the workplace. Despite the requirement for formal qualifications, the hospitality industry allows experience-based employment and progression without formal qualifications. Most students are appointed at entry level positions within the industry and are expected to work their way up within the industry. Employers view lifelong learning as a necessity for employment progression within this sector.

- **Wholesale and Retail:** The wholesale and retail industry is a wide-ranging domain which comprises a huge number of different work contexts from fashion to grocery stores, call centres, pharmacies, bookshops and so on. Accordingly, qualifications for employment in the wholesale and retail sector span a number of skills areas and are codified according to specific occupations (OFO codes) within the industry. These include NQF Level 2 (Grade 10) qualifications for meat cutters, NQF level 3 qualifications for bakers and postgraduate qualifications for trainee managers, for example. Large wholesale and retail employers generally use matric or an equivalent qualification as entrance for employment. Unit standard based qualifications provided through learnerships are widely used within this industry.

Retail qualifications are not broadly offered by public colleges, but universities of technology have been developing and offering such qualifications³ resulting in high employment rates for graduates. An important criterion mentioned was that students should show evidence of casual work in a retail sector. It was mentioned that collaboration between a retailer and universities of technology is a helpful strategy since company specific training resulted in “work-ready” and therefore, highly employable students. However, in this regard it should be kept in mind that partnerships between employers, SETAs and colleges take time and effort to be nurtured and sustained. Furthermore, partnerships have to take into account the needs, benefits and realities of each of the parties – it should not be assumed that they all have the same interests or that policy is the driving imperative.

³ For example, the National Certificate: Wholesale and Retail Operations (see detail at: <http://regqs.saqa.org.za/showQualification.php?id=58206>)

Additional Requirements

A number of employers called for career guidance to be built into college qualifications as they often received applications from college graduates only to find that the student had little interest in the job that they applied for. The importance of discipline, punctuality, and ethics were stressed. A number of hotels noted that students, particularly from TVET Colleges appear to lack job-seeking skills. Student CVs are apparently often of poor quality; students often present themselves inappropriately, and are unable to demonstrate their knowledge or passion for the industry during interviews.

Additional knowledge areas identified by engineering firms included ICT skills, electronic communication skills as well administrative skills. Additional skills identified within the hospitality industry were ICT programmes that are specific to the hospitality industry, e.g. Opera, Fidelio, My Cross etc. as well as standard computer packages such as MS Office. Students were also required to have a basic understanding of business skills and principles such as budgeting and management systems.

The evidence gathered from each of the three employer groupings informed the curriculum development, and set-out the elements of a 'Workplace Preparation Programme':

The Workplace Preparation Programme

College staff in the research working group agreed with employers that cross-cutting skills might be better addressed in a focused, targeted,

work-preparation programme delivered shortly before students leave the colleges to seek practical placements for the completion of their qualification. Although elements of the necessary skills described in the interviews were found to exist across the N4-N6 courses in the NATED syllabus, the skills were not dealt with in any systematic way as a real workplace preparation and hence, students tended not to pay too much attention to them. The needs identified by employers to be covered in the Work Preparation Programme have been arranged within five thematic areas described in the table below.

Phase 3 and beyond

As part of the programme pilot, four TVET Colleges in the Western Cape delivered the Workplace Preparation Programme to just over 100 students of which 80 will be selected for placement in industry. This selection will take place on the basis of academic performance, voluntary attendance of the workplace preparation programme, and attitudes displayed within their learning programme. To improve the working relationships and communication strategies between college lecturers and work placement officers, colleges involved these officers in delivery of the course curriculum.

College students participating in the Workplace Preparation Programme have reacted very positively to the programme. Due to the project being profiled in a national college magazine, there have been calls from colleges in other provinces to use the materials, thus extending the learnings

The five thematic areas of the Workplace Preparation Programme

Graduates need training in:	This means addressing:
Being a Professional	Appearance, work ethic, punctuality, developing excellence
Communication	Manager relations, customer relations, interview skills, telephone/mobile etiquette, body language
Understanding the workplace	Rights and responsibilities, conflict management, problem solving and decision making, managing pressure, taking initiative/ being proactive
Values and ethics	Honesty, integrity, willingness to learn
Application of college learning to the workplace	Orientation to the workplace where they will be an intern. This comprises two visits to industry.

of the project further afield. A range of employers have committed to employ TVET college graduates and the impact of this intervention will be progressively reported on in national media (and in subsequent Hands-on Learning articles).

Conclusion

The public further education and training sector is still facing the challenge of becoming responsive to employment market demands. The task of securing the links and feedback mechanisms between the TVET sector and industry needs has largely focused on curriculum responsiveness on the supply side.⁴ However, in order for comprehensive connection mechanisms between the supply and demand sides to be established and strengthened, it is necessary to involve all key stakeholders to ensure that TVET colleges are responsive to the skills

needs of the employment market. The research conducted by FETI and the Workplace Preparation Programme, represent an important foray into the field of curriculum responsiveness (for both supply and demand sides), and contributes to addressing a significant challenge that is currently weakening the effectiveness of the TVET sector.

⁴ Akoojee, S., S. McGrath & M. Visser. (2008). *Further education and training colleges*. In A. Kraak & K. Press (eds.), *Human Resources Development Review: Education, Employment and Skills in South Africa*. HSRC Press. Pp 254 – 277.

This learning brief tells of the hands-on experience of:

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