

Match policy with reality and

Ill-conceived, fanciful proposals will not improve South Africa's education system

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One of the most widely quoted reports of the Centre for Higher Education Transformation in Cape Town is *Responding to the Educational Needs of Post-School Youth*.

Published in 2009, this was the report that introduced the concept of "not in education, employment or training", which is now firmly entrenched in South African education jargon — even Statistics South Africa uses the term in its reports.

The report shocked the education community and its ministry with the finding that almost three million youths between the ages 18 and 24 were so-called Neets. And it spurred the education ministry to focus on the further education and training (FET) college sector.

Social time bomb

The study received widespread coverage and a *Mail & Guardian* article, which was referenced in the *New York Times*, drew attention to the potential social disruption that 2.8-million young people not in education, employment or training could cause ("Idle minds, social time bomb", July 31 to August 6 2009).

Because the study reported on 18- to 24-year-olds, its impact deepened when the 2009 crime statistics showed that the average age of a house robber was between 19 and 25 years and 90% of the robbers arrested did not have matric or were unemployed, or both.

Further afield, last year's North African "spring" highlighted the prominent role of young people in those uprisings. By 2010 youth unemployment and the lack of training opportunities had become an acknowledged problem worldwide. Across the 30 countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), there were nearly 15-million unemployed workers aged 15 to 24 — four million more than at the end of 2007. In France and Italy, one in four young workers was unemployed; in Spain, 40% were jobless.

Statistics South Africa estimated in mid-2010 that South Africa's population was close to 50-million, of which more than half (52%) were estimated to be younger than 25. New entrants into the labour market aged 15 to 24 constituted 20% of the total population and 32% of those normally considered economically active (that is, 15- to 64-year-olds).

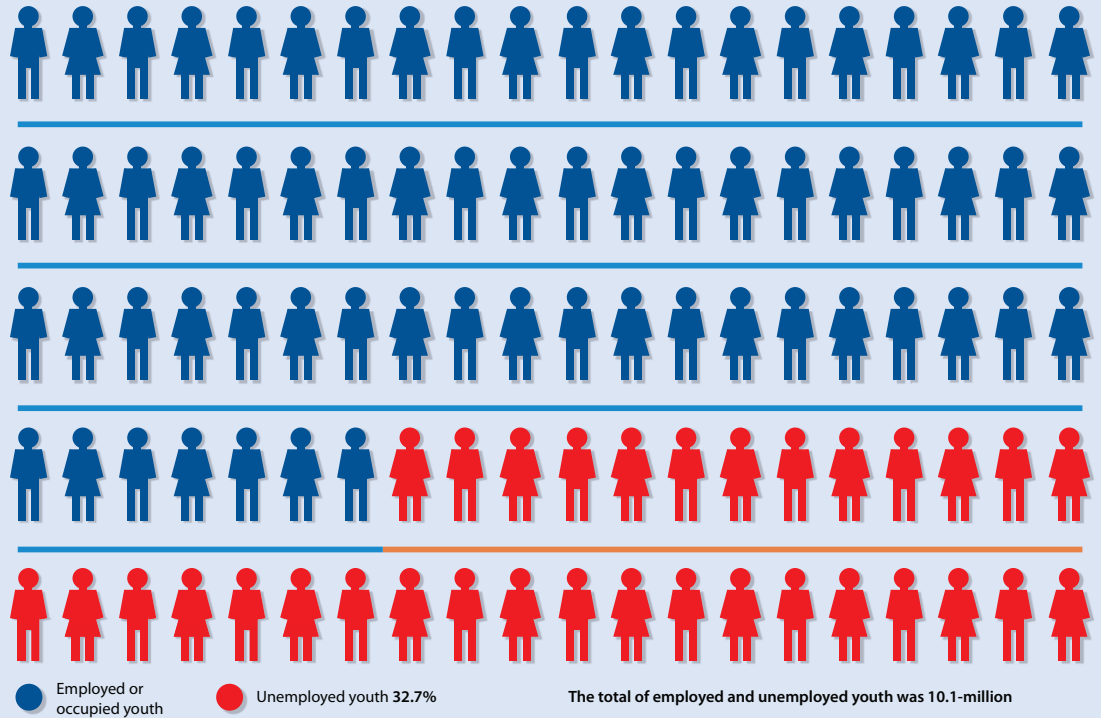
Stats SA also reported that out of a total of 10.1-million individuals in the 15-to-24 age cohort, 32.7% (or 3.3-million young people) were neither employed nor attending an educational institution.

The OECD released a survey in July 2010 that revealed South Africa had the worst rate of unemployment for youth between the ages 15 and 24 among 36 countries surveyed two years before. According to the report, South Africa's 50% employment rate for working-age youth lagged behind other middle-income emerging market economies, which employ about 80%.

The situation is compounded by

One-third neither employed nor attending an educational institution

Youth unemployment in South Africa, mid-2010, of those aged 15 to 24



Graphic: JOHN McCANN Source: STATS SA



Uncertain future: A number of children are leaving school without completing grades nine, 10 and 11. Photo: Madelene Cronjé

racial disparities: 53.4% of young black 15- to 24-year-olds were unemployed by the end of 2009, which was three times worse than the 14.5% unemployment rate of young white South Africans.

On the one hand, youth unemployment is a demand-side problem because the number of jobs created in the economy is too small. On the other hand, youth unemployment is a supply-side problem because many young South Africans lack the appropriate skills, work-related capabilities and higher education qualifications required for a high-skills economy.

The 2009 Centre for Higher Education Transformation report described the post-school education and work environment as being characterised by the following:

- A large annual outflow of students from schooling without meaningful further educational opportunities;
- Post-school institutional architecture that limits further educational opportunities for young people;
- A lack of integrated and system-

atic data about the "excluded youth"; and

● A recapitalised FET colleges sector that needs to build capacity.

Basic statistics that paint the landscape of the need for access to higher education in South Africa are:

- Number of students who wrote matric in 2011: 496090;
- Number of students who passed the exam: 348117;
- Number who qualified for entry into a university: 347647;
- Estimated number of students who were admitted to a university: 175000; and
- Number of students who passed but did not get into university: 173117.

To the students who will not enter a university (173117) should be added the students who failed the grade 12 exam (147973), making a total of 321090 grade 12 students who will have left school with few, if any, options in terms of what they can do next.

An additional 14948 full-time candidates enrolled for the 2011 matric examinations, but did not write them.

In addition, there is an unknown number of young people who left school having completed grades nine, 10 or 11, who have even fewer options for continuing education or the possibility of employment.

The accumulated effect of this situation is that in 2010 there were 3.2-million young people in the 18-to-25 age group who were not in education, employment or training.

The number of Neets must be put into context. There are 950 000 students in South African public and private universities and 400 000 students in public and private FET colleges — a total of 1 350 000. In other words, there are 2.5 times as many young, unemployed people who are out of education as there are in education in the 18-to-25 cohort.

According to the OECD, 20-million South Africans — 40% of the total population of 50-million — live in poverty and 16% of them are of an age when they could, and should, be in post-school education. For these young people, the situation in which they find themselves can best be described as being trapped in, and adding to, the poverty cycle. For these youths, with the exception of a small minority of "entrepreneurs", the only successful way out of the trap is better educational opportunities.

A plethora of policies

Last year, the government released three important policy plans with a bearing on the post-school sector and its development: the strategic plan for higher education and training, the new growth path and the national development plan. All three highlight the importance of education and training and comment on how changes in their systems should be effected.

Early this year, the department of higher education and training

released a fourth policy document, the green paper for post-school education and training.

In addition, Higher Education South Africa, the association of university vice-chancellors, produced a paper last year on the non-university post-school sector. Its Position Paper on an Extended Post-School Education System sets out the consensus position of the vice-chancellors that universities have two central roles to play in relation to the rest of the post-school system: human resources and curriculum development, and targeted partnerships that can lead, in a diversity of ways, to greater articulation within the post-school sector.

South Africa is therefore considering a significant range of ideas and new, strongly promoted policy proposals. They are likely to have a major impact on what needs to be done to provide the best educational opportunities for young (and not so young) South Africans and, more especially, provide access to post-school education for poor young South Africans, the majority of whom are women and black.

Once debated and revised, the green paper will be passed as an Act of Parliament and will become the mechanism through which the changes proposed in the various documents will be effected. As a matter of interest, all the government documents tie their plans to anti-poverty and human resource development strategies, and so the changes the Ford Foundation is introducing to its advancing higher education access and success initiative in South Africa will serve to draw it even closer to the other initiatives that form the raft of work in its office for Southern Africa.

The four documents carry similar, although not identical, messages. Their main designs for the future of the post-school education sector are:

young people stand a chance



Youthful perspective: Among other things, South Africa needs to expand the capabilities of its FET subsector. Photos: David Harrison

- The university sector must be expanded (two new universities are to be created in the two provinces that do not have any – Mpumalanga and the Northern Cape). This implies that even more postgraduate students will have to be enrolled and encouraged to work in academia against the reality that there is an impending shortage of academics. It also implies that students who graduate with master's and doctor's degrees will have to be of a uniformly high quality. The target is to shift the present PhD production rate from 28 graduates per million per year to 100 graduates per million per year by 2030;

- Universities need to be positioned to play their role in the "knowledge economy" and fulfil their roles as critical drivers of social and economic development – and employment;

- Universities must become the core of a national system of innovation. In addition, universities need to contribute to faster growth of a "green economy";

- The goal for cohort enrolment in universities must grow from the present mean rate of 17% to a mean rate of 30% by 2030, that is, within the next 18 years;

- The FET subsector must be expanded and strengthened in terms of its capacity, quality, curriculum development and successful teaching and learning and so also in terms of throughput rates. The FET colleges currently have extremely low success rates – on average, about 20% of all students who enter ever qualify. In some institutions, the throughput rate is as low as 4%;

- The college subsector must become both more diverse and differentiated, but at the same time more integrated and coherent, which means that well-defined and well-understood routes of articulation between all the subsectors of the post-school system, including the universities, must be created and sustained;

- Enrolment must grow from the current level of 400 000 to 1 000 000 by 2014 – a growth of 300% in two years – without losing sight of the need for quality and success;

- Students must be supported as they navigate their way between subsectors of the post-school system; and

- New kinds of post-school institu-

tions, such as community education and training centres, will be created at the post-school, pre-university subsector level.

Shaping the future?

The publication of the book *Shaping the Future of South Africa's Youth* has coincided with the release of these policy recommendations on post-school education and training by government and higher education stakeholders. The book is not a systematic attempt to address the various policy positions, although many of the chapters address, directly or indirectly, some of the policy issues raised, particularly those in the green paper for post-school education and training.

The book opens with an analysis by Stephanie Allais on how the national qualifications framework has developed since the early years of South Africa's democracy and the implications it holds for young people not in education, employment or training. The two chapters that follow focus on the youth: Cecil Mlatsheni examines the impact of unemployment on South African youth and Tia Linda Zuze provides an international perspective on issues associated with youth-to-work transitions.

The book goes on to examine various aspects of the South African post-school education and training system. Using the most recent data available, Charles Sheppard and Ronaldo Sheppard provide a unique statistical analysis of the FET system and project two possible scenarios for its growth. This is followed by a chapter by Rolf Stumpf, Joy Papier, Timothy McBride and Seamus Needham that examines the potential for FET colleges to follow mixed higher education-further education and training models and to increase occupational and workplace training programme enrolments.

The contribution by Trish Gibbon, Johan Muller and Heather Nel examines options for higher education institutions to play a strategic role in helping to build an expanded post-school education and training system and support it in the future.

The focus on training is explored by Nicola Branson, who examines trends in training in South Africa. Sean Archer identifies a number of fundamental questions that need to be

answered empirically if South Africa is to respond effectively to its national skills development needs.

The book concludes with a chap-

ter by Helene Perold that provides a youth perspective on key issues raised in the book.

Although the goals and targets artic-

ulated in the policy documents are valuable, even noble, and relevant to South Africa's needs, some may prove impossible to achieve. Reaching an FET colleges enrolment of one million young people – up from the current figure of 400 000 in just two years – while simultaneously improving the quality of management as well as teaching and learning, is unlikely to be achievable. A more modest increase might, however, be attainable – provided the recommendations made by Higher Education South Africa and the authors in this book are taken seriously by all the relevant players.

This is an edited extract from *Shaping the Future of South Africa's Youth: Rethinking Post-school Education and Skills Training in South Africa*, edited by Helene Perold, Nico Cloete and Joy Papier. The book is published by African Minds for the Centre for Higher Education Transformation, the Southern African Labour and Development Research Unit and the Further Education and Training Institute

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