



Vocational education and training for sustainability in South Africa: The role of public and private provision

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ABSTRACT

Written in the twilight of the Mbeki Presidency, this paper considers the role that skills development has in the sustainability of the South African political-economic project. It explores some of the disarticulations of public policy and argues that these both undermine public sector delivery and open up opportunities for private provision to be, under certain circumstances, more responsive to the challenges of national development. We argue that there is a possibility that the state could work more smartly with both sets of providers. Crucially, however, this would necessitate working more smartly within itself. This was a major plank of the Mbeki strategy but it has failed conspicuously with regard to the Education–Labour relationship. Whether a new President can achieve a radical reworking of this relationship may be an important indicator of the viability of any new development project.

The article concludes with reflections on the renewed international interest in skills development as a way of responding to the real and imagined pressures and opportunities of globalisation. Given the limited success of South Africa in pursuing skills development, we ask whether other African governments are any more likely to achieve a genuine combination of political, social and economic sustainability. The sustainability of national development projects in Africa is likely to continue to be problematic, and skills development will only ever be able to play a limited role in addressing this challenge. Nonetheless, governments can do more to support the sustainability of these skills development systems and need to pay attention to both public and private provision in so doing.

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1. Introduction

The current international orthodoxy of globalisation leads to a powerful stress on skills as a central element of sustainable economic, social and political systems at the national and regional level. In the globalisation account, national economic success is largely dependent on the ability to create, attract and deploy human capital more effectively than competitor nations or regions. Skills and knowledge help build international competitiveness, employment and prosperity. This belief is at the heart of OECD and European Union policy statements since the mid-1990s on themes such as lifelong learning and the knowledge economy (e.g., OECD, 1996a,b; European Commission, 2001) and in national policy statements such as the Leitch Report in Britain (DFES, 2006).

Globalisation is intimately linked with the demise of the welfare state and the rise of neoliberalism. Part of the orthodoxy argues that transfer payments to the poor are no longer viable. Instead, the poor are to be brought into the social and economic mainstream by improved employability. Again, knowledge, skills and, crucially, attitudes are seen as central to this drive. It is alleged that improved levels of education will bring with them better prospects of employment, higher incomes and lower propensities to crime and other forms of social delinquency. In the context of the “War on Terror” and a heightened fear about the loyalty of domestic Muslim minorities, Western governments have also come to see education as a vital strategy for managing such communities.

Achieving economic competitiveness, improving social cohesion, reducing crime and, where necessary, shifting the blame for lack of success onto individuals all form important elements of sustaining political parties in power. Thus, education is widely seen as a key policy tool of the globalisation era.

Although such arguments are furthest developed in the most economically advanced countries, they are increasingly permeating other nations. The particular history of South Africa and its

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predominant geopolitical and economic role in Africa have led to such arguments having considerable influence since the beginnings of the negotiated settlement in the early 1990s.

South Africa's ability to achieve sustainability for its national development project is not just of importance domestically. Rather, its regional predominance means that its developmental success or failure is vital to the rest of the continent, both in real economic terms and in terms of international perceptions of African "viability".

This question of the sustainability of the South African national development project, and the role of skills therein, is the focus of this article. Much has been written about South African education and training, including within IJED. An earlier paper of ours (McGrath and Akoojee, 2007) considered the role of education and training in the current *Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa*. Our current paper adds to existing knowledge in two ways. First, it has an explicit focus on the sustainability of the South African development project in economic, social and political terms and does so in the light of the Polokwane Conference of the African National Congress in December 2007, at which Jacob Zuma replaced President Mbeki as Party leader.² Second, it compares and contrasts the roles that public and private further education and training are playing in the development of intermediate skills. There has been little attention to the role of private skills development in Africa (see, Atchoarena and Esquieu, 2002 for an exception), and an article that combines a focus on public and private provision is a rarity.

In what follows, we will draw on our individual and joint research and writings over the past 15 years on skills development in South Africa, particularly work done for the Human Sciences Research Council, where we were both formerly based. In the next section we will provide an overview of debates about the sustainability of the South African national development project and of key elements of the national skills strategy. Then, we will turn to first public and then private provision, outlining the key features of each before considering their own internal sustainability and their contribution to the overall sustainability of the South African skills for development project. This will lead us to a series of conclusions about the state of skills development for national development in South Africa and some, more tentative, reflections on the wider salience of the South African case.

2. The sustainability of the South African national development project

Sustainability of a special kind has been at the heart of the development challenge for South Africa. Since the beginning of the negotiated settlement at the start of 1990s, development thinking has sought to balance growth and redistribution so that both work together. A Government of National Unity was designed to prevent white flight and ethnic separatism. Policy through the Reconstruction and Development Programme, the Growth, Employment and Redistribution Programme and the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa has sought to get growth that is sustainable both economically and politically, the latter requiring equity and black economic empowerment. Inevitably, throughout this period there have been contestations around the particular ways in which the state has sought to balance growth and equity but there has been a general acceptance that some such balance is necessary for the post-Apartheid project to be sustainable.

In late 2003 the Presidency issued *Towards a Ten Year Review* (Presidency, 2003), an analysis of the performance of 10 years of democratic government, which drew both on data from govern-

ment departments and from existing and new work from other agencies and researchers. The overall message of the review was generally positive about the performance of the state but provided a stark warning about the challenge ahead:

The advances made in the First Decade by far supersede the weaknesses. Yet, if all indicators were to continue along the same trajectory, especially in respect of the dynamic of economic inclusion and exclusion, we could soon reach a point where the negatives start to overwhelm the positives. This could precipitate a vicious cycle of decline in all spheres. (Presidency, 2003: p. 102)

At that point, 10 years into the new South Africa, the state could justifiably point to great success against most macro-economic targets. However, the stark statistics on poverty, inequality and unemployment provide the underside of the story of relative success. Between 18 and 24 million people (45–55%) were in poverty, including between 8 and 10 million in extreme poverty (Everatt, 2003; Gelb, 2003; Landman, 2003; van der Berg and Louw, 2003; Bhorat et al., 2004; Meth and Dias, 2004; UNDP, 2004). One in 10 Africans were malnourished; one in four African children were stunted (Woolard, 2002; Everatt, 2003).³ Unsurprisingly, this poverty had pronounced spatial, racial and gender dimensions (Woolard and Leibbrandt, 2001; Everatt, 2003; Gelb, 2003). Poverty was also associated with serious inequality, which was amongst the highest in the world (Gelb, 2003; Landman, 2003; Bhorat and Cassim, 2004; Roberts, 2004). And, lurking behind all these statistics was the AIDS pandemic, which contributed to and exacerbated all these other elements (Vass, 2008).

Awareness of the challenges that remained in making the "South African miracle" sustainable led the Mbeki Government, at the start of its second term, to become more explicitly focused on delivery and the creation of a developmental state (McGrath and Akoojee, 2007). Woolard and Woolard (2008: p. 83) show that social spending grew from 9.2% of GDP in 2000/01 to 10.5% in 2003/04. Recent statistics suggest that there has been some decline in poverty (Woolard and Woolard, 2008), with real per capita income growing by more than the average for the poorest three deciles of the population between 2000 and 2006 (StatsSA, 2008).

However, whilst there is some evidence for the, at least partial, success of the government's strategy in economic terms, it appeared to be slipping into serious political decline as the Mbeki second term wore on. Social exclusion is perceived by many to have not been addressed adequately:

After the end of apartheid there was genuine hope that the lives of the poor would improve. This is what the incoming ANC government had promised. But as more than a decade passed, hope turned to frustration, despair and anger. Those most affected by these broken promises, the 'poors' (sic), have not been silent. In 2005 alone there were 6000 protests in South Africa. The growing dissatisfaction was evident on February 27th, 2006, as Abahlali BaseMjondolo (the shack dweller's movement) with community movements throughout Durban organized an "UnFreedom Day" event in protest of the dire conditions in which so many people must live. (Walsh, 2007)

2007 saw the emergence of a problem of inadequate electricity power supply, which led to the closure of mines for a limited period in February 2008, and which resulted in negotiations at the highest

² This paper went to press a week after President Mbeki's eventual resignation.

³ We will use the official South African racial classifications where "black" is the aggregate term for Africans, Indians and coloureds. Like many other commentators, we acknowledge the state's rationale for using these categories whilst remaining concerned about their essentialising nature and potential impact on building a non-racial society.

level between government and the private sector. The impact of power cuts is economically detrimental but also appears to have fed into a general sense of a government in decline.

By the end of 2007, however, a more significant political event had happened. In a party that prides itself on loyalty, the ANC Congress of December was remarkable for its hotly contested elections that saw the President and a series of senior allies fail to get elected to senior party positions. That the new Party President is widely seen as a populist seems to mark a radical shift from the careful management of transition that has characterised most of the actions of Presidents Mandela and Mbeki. Of course, at the time of writing, Zuma is only Party leader and not President and it is not yet clear how far and for how long he can shape a new development path, particularly as he is still facing an investigation into corruption allegations. For the moment, it appears that he is at least seeking to realign the ANC to a more pro-poor focus under the rallying cry of a “democratic developmental state”:

While acting to promote growth, efficiency and productivity, it must be equally effective in addressing the social conditions of the masses of our people and realising economic progress for the poor. (ANC, 2008, p. 4)

What does appear clear is that the Mbeki project of trying to build an efficient developmental state is in danger of failing the test of delivery and, hence, sustainability. That much of its failure is largely a matter of perceptions may indicate that this failure is more political than economic.

3. Skills and the national development project

Our earlier paper in *IJED* (McGrath and Akoojee, 2007) explored in detail how skills development took on an important role in overall national development policy in South Africa after 2004 through the *Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa* (AsgiSA), and its skills development component, the *Joint Initiative on Priority Skills Acquisition* (JIPSA).⁴ AgsiSA/JIPSA lies within the international tradition of skills policies that have emerged as an attempt to respond to the assumed effects of the “global knowledge economy” and contains the same assumptions that skills development can play a vital role in both economic competitiveness/growth and social inclusion/poverty reduction.

To recap our previous article’s argument, AgsiSA was launched in 2006 with the central commitment of raising GDP growth from 3% in the first democratic decade to 5% per annum for the next decade. As we noted:

The “shared” part of the initiative’s focus continues the concern of the ANC’s 2004 Manifesto with making sure that this growth is reflected in reduced poverty, inequality and unemployment and improved black economic participation. (McGrath and Akoojee, 2007, p. 5)

The desire was also to diversify away from South Africa’s traditional reliance on the commodity sector and to eliminate the “second economy” (essentially subsistence and informal activities). AgsiSA has six elements:

- (1) Infrastructure programmes including electricity, transport and preparation for the 2010 FIFA World Cup. This was seen as requiring a doubling of public sector investment.

- (2) Sectoral industrial strategies, focusing on business process outsourcing, tourism and biofuels (ICT was also added subsequently), with a focus on broad-based black economic empowerment and small business development.
- (3) Skills and education initiatives, covered by JIPSA.
- (4) Second economy interventions, including better access to procurement (especially in the new infrastructure programme); a focus on promoting economic opportunities for women and youth; a streamlined regulatory environment for small businesses and the extension of the Expanded Public Works Programme (cf. McCord, 2008).
- (5) Macro-economic issues, particularly addressing exchange rate volatility and maintaining low inflation.
- (6) Improved public administration, including staff development and enhanced recruitment (Presidency, 2006).

AsgiSA can claim success to date on economic growth, on exchange rate volatility and on increased investment by both public and private sectors. Sectoral industrial policies have been developed for the priority areas and there appear to have been some improvements in the capacity of local government. However, it is clear that problems of electricity supply have worsened. Moreover, the situation on skills is mixed, as we show now in our specific consideration of JIPSA (Presidency, 2008a).

JIPSA was charged with:

- leading the implementation of a joint initiative of government, business and organised labour to accelerate the provision of priority skills to meet the AgsiSA objectives
- giving momentum and support to the implementation of AgsiSA
- prioritising key skills and develop appropriate human resource development strategies to address these in the short to medium term
- mobilising senior leadership in business, government, organised labour and institutions concerned with education and training and science and technology to address national priorities in a more co-ordinated and targeted way
- promoting greater relevance and responsiveness in the education and training system and strengthen the employability of graduates
- laying the foundations for more co-ordinated and effective human resources development strategies
- reporting to the AgsiSA Task Team and Cabinet on progress made towards agreed objectives
- identifying blockages and obstacles within the system of education and training that stand in the way of the achievement of JIPSA’s objectives
- leading an effective programme to communicate JIPSA’s objectives and consult with stakeholders (Presidency, 2008b, p. 8).

JIPSA was not intended to be a long-term and systemic solution to South Africa’s skills needs. Rather, it was an attempt to build strategic partnerships around a series of particular projects that were seen as having the potential to make significant contributions to skills development. It was extended to 3 years from its initial 18 months as it was judged to be worthwhile but needing a longer time frame. Whilst the annual review of JIPSA’s second year points to a number of successes, it is also honest about a series of continued skills problems.

The vacancies in the public sector are still at unacceptably high levels; public schools and university throughputs are still too low; the quality and availability of trainers is a major constraint; and rural communities have inadequate access to

⁴ Since this paper was accepted, it has been announced that JIPSA will not be continuing, having reached its initial end date. That responsibility now falls to the Minister of Education can be seen to highlight a major tension that we identify in this paper.

education and skills opportunities. These are among other significant national skills challenges. (Presidency, 2008b, p. 5)

The theme of skills development as a national imperative has been taken up by elements of the South Africa business community (e.g., Godsell and Faurie, 2007), with echoes of progressive business interests in the development of the new South African skills system in the early 1990s (McGrath and Badroodien, 2006). At the heart of current arguments is the notion that there is a mismatch between the skills being produced and those demanded by a growing economy (Kraak, 2008). Worries about skills shortages are given popular currency by concerns about the infrastructural needs of the 2010 Football World Cup. What is not yet apparent is the way that the shift in ANC leadership may come to reshape this discourse.

4. The sustainability of public further education and training

In a number of earlier papers, we and others have charted the very significant progress of the South African public further education and training colleges since 1994 but we have also highlighted a range of problems that seem to threaten their future sustainability (see, for instance, McGrath, 2000; Fisher et al., 2003; McGrath, 2004; Akoojee et al., 2008). We will begin a review of these debates by quickly summarising the standard account of the state of the college sector in 1994.

4.1. Public FET in 1994

As Akoojee, McGrath and Visser (2008: p. 254) argue: “In 1994 the incoming democratic government was faced with a college sector that was not fit for its purpose.” Students were predominantly white and institutions were racially segregated, leading to duplication of facilities and huge unevenness of resourcing. The homeland policy meant that many of the newer institutions intended for African learners were located far from centres of economic activity.

South Africa’s experience of the global economic downturn of the early 1970s, coupled with its own particular political crisis, led to a sharp decline in apprenticeship numbers. For urban, white colleges, this meant that their traditional core of students disappeared and they were forced to rely increasingly on “private candidates”, learners without any access to work placements. These trends undermined college–employer relations and contributed to an increasing mismatch between the programme offerings of colleges and the demands of industry. Understandably, colleges were largely written off by employers, government and the public as low quality and low status.

4.2. Public FET now and the challenge of sustainability

Our summary of the state of public FET in McGrath and Akoojee (2007) needs both positive and negative revision. We noted that the most important achievement of the Department of Education in the FET sector was the merging of the existing racialised colleges into 50 new multi-site and multi-racial institutions. We cautioned that these were still fragile. Whilst this remains true, it is apparent that the colleges have continued to strengthen their systems, identities and activities.

Since writing our earlier paper, a new set of programmes, the National Certificate (Vocational)–NCV, have been introduced and the review of the National Qualifications Framework has finally ended after more than 6 years. However, we will argue below that these are not entirely positive steps. Equally, the partial recapitalisation of colleges has been followed by the introduction of bursaries for NCV students, addressing a longstanding concern

of commentators on the college sector, including ourselves. However, here too, the implications are not entirely positive.

Student numbers increased from 76,000 in 1991 to 406,000 in 2002 (headcount figures). However, instead of the projected continued rapid growth (to a million learners by 2010), the sector saw an 8% decline in enrolments between 2002 and 2004 (Powell and Hall, 2004; Department of Education, 2006). Student demographics more accurately reflect national gender and race profiles. The same is true for staff. However, these aggregate figures hide considerable variations across programmes and institutions for students and post level for staff. There remains considerable racial and gender segmentation within the sector.

The shift to NCV appears to mark a dramatic change for colleges and should be regarded as a massive experiment whose impact and sustainability are far from certain at this early point of implementation. In contrast to the highly diversified British further education college and American community college models that dominated early post-Apartheid policy debates, the Department of Education appears to have resuscitated the old technical high school model of the Apartheid era. In so far as new funding is tied tightly to NCV, colleges are being directed towards focusing solely on young people (notionally 15+) who have performed moderately at the General Education and Training Certificate level (after 9 years of schooling). Plausibly, this cohort is seen as having weak literacy and numeracy skills. They are directed to a series of general vocational tracks that are not closely linked to occupations and to workplace training, and to a 3-year programme that parallels the academic FET stream in duration. Whether NCV can successfully avoid the common pitfall of vocational tracks, that they are neither academic nor occupational, remains to be seen.

In meantime, the NCV move abandons the previous policy direction of opening up colleges to older learners. It also undermines recent relationships with employers built around delivery of short courses and participation in learnership delivery, under the Department of Labour (DoL). Thus, the South African public colleges may be bucking the international trend towards greater pressure on such providers to be labour market responsive (Cosser et al., 2003; Johanson and Adams, 2004; MacAllum et al., 2004).

Neither does NCV respond to the powerful national development message that skills need to be developed now. At best, the NCV graduates may be ready to access industry training programmes at the end of the 3 years and may make accelerated progression towards artisanal status then. This also raises problematic questions about the fitness of purpose and presumed equivalence under the NQF of learnership awards and NCV at NQF level 4. Whilst these should be formally equivalent, there appears to be a danger that this is only in the sense that both may be inadequate for labour market purposes. Thus learners may need to seek to get both awards to have real prospects of decent work.

Nor does NCV respond to the aspirations of the colleges. As well as seeing benefits in new relationships with employers around the provision of DoL programmes, college leaders still argue powerfully for the need to continue their tradition of offering programmes that are at pre-degree level. These leaders are very conscious of the work done across the FET–HE boundary by their sister colleges in the USA, Britain, Denmark, Australia and the Netherlands, with which they have strong networks.

The move to NCV thus seems to mark a significant stepping up of the Department of Education’s refusal to let these institutions be autonomous. Whereas there seemed to be a slow movement towards British-style managed autonomy (McGrath, 2004) under the previous Minister of Education, any autonomy has become very circumscribed. Whilst the 2006 Further Education and Training Colleges Act (Republic of South Africa, 2006) has given colleges the

ability to hire and fire, the Department has effectively prevented them from deciding on which programmes to offer to whom.

Although there has been new funding tied to the introduction of NCV; and colleges can now expect a more stable recruitment of cohorts of learners; there is a danger of falling into a monocultural approach that may undermine longer-term sustainability by preventing colleges from successfully diversifying their sources of income.

There is always a tension in vocational education that it is essentially a supply-side solution, driven by socio-political concerns about youth unemployment, rather than a reflection of immediate demand for skills, which may be limited. However, the South African public colleges presently look particularly fragile as the state has trammelled their capacity to be responsive, thus undermining their value in the eyes of employers. As we will suggest below, this unintentional undermining of public FET colleges offers greater possibilities for private providers.

5. The sustainability of private further education and training

5.1. A brief background

Private provision of intermediate skills has a long history in South Africa, both through face-to-face and distance modes. In 2001, the Department of Education conducted a pre-registration exercise. An HSRC study based on the resultant database found 706,884 learners, located at 4178 sites of 864 providers (Akoojee, 2003). However, this is likely to have seriously underestimated the total size of the sector. Indeed, recent conversations with the South African Qualifications Authority put total institutions closer to 4000, implying the learner numbers are almost certainly greater than 1 million.

Akoojee (2007) developed a typology of providers and learners.

We will work with a simplified version of this in the rest of our current paper, focusing primarily on the first three categories.

5.2. The challenge of sustainability

All of these private forms of provision are of course market dependent as part of their nature. Whereas it is very unlikely that the state would allow a public provider to fail financially, this is always a possibility for private provider, no matter how remote. Nonetheless, certain types are typically more sustainable than others.

The most sustainable are probably the multi-institutes. These mostly resemble the public providers in terms of size, range of sites and multi-disciplinarity. However, they are able to be more flexible than the public colleges as they are far less subject to bureaucratic control. As a result, they can offer a wider range of curricula, in differing modes, to a wider range of potential customers. Their considerable income streams mean that they can cross-subsidise and provide bursaries to the pre- and unemployed learners. This suggests that they may be able to compete with NCV for poorer youth and are certainly better positioned than the public colleges to attract the older unemployed. Indeed, if we also considered the NGO segment, then it is probable that private providers may be better positioned to reach the poorest than their public rivals.

For the employed segment, again, it is likely that the multi-institutes are providing more industry-relevant skills. Thus, they may be delivering more on employability, although the data from both public and private providers is insufficient to answer this question. It appears that the retreat of public provision from industry responsiveness may have given these private providers an enhanced market and improved financial sustainability.

Training consultancies begin from a weaker institutional base than the large multi-institutes. Nonetheless, there are real market opportunities for them. They are particularly well-suited to accessing the multi-billion Rand levy-grant system,⁵ under the DoL, and are very responsive to the immediate skills needs of employers. They have paid major attention to their racial ownership patterns as they know that black economic empowerment is an important factor in getting contracts, both under the levy-grant system and more widely with the public and corporate sectors. This attention to race also aids their political sustainability, both through the symbolism of conforming to national development imperatives and the frequent strategic targeting of politically well-connected potential black partners. Furthermore, the future sustainability of many of these consultancies is enhanced by the expansion of South African trade and investment across the continent. McGrath and Badroodien (2006) have noted the potential spread of South African training standards for the rest of the continent as South African (and other transnational) corporations draw upon South African practices in their work across Africa. There is some evidence that this is also reflected in the use of South African consultants to deliver training continent-wide.

Specialist providers are the most varied in sustainability potential of these three types. The top end are providing focused programmes, often in ICT, that have clear market value and are capable of reaching a large middle-class customer base. Such ICT qualifications are internationally-recognised and far more attractive than comparable national awards, giving a further advantage over public providers. However, as these qualifications may assist migration, they may somewhat undermine the overall national skills project, although there is also some evidence of returnees in the ICT sector (Akoojee et al., 2007).

However, the specialist segment also includes the “fly-by-nights”, weak providers that often exploit poor learners, whether deliberately or not. In so far as these providers cater to a more vulnerable black market, they potentially could be seen as politically legitimate. However, it is clear that they are treated with suspicion, rather than supported, by the state.

The political sustainability of private providers in general is also relatively strong for two reasons. First, the poor responsiveness of public providers to industry needs means that private providers are seen as important partners by the Department of Labour. For DoL, the delivery of demanded skills matters far more than the identity of the provider. Indeed, DoL rivalry with DoE may make them more favourably disposed to private providers.

Second, the private providers have done much to change their student and staff demographics and even ownership patterns. Learner demographics for race and gender are broadly comparable with the public sector. Indeed, the composition of African learners in both segments was 73% in the latest available data, reflecting a major transformation of both provider types. Both, too, continue to reflect limited progress on gender equality in enrolments—public providers' enrolments being 60% male; private 57%. Interestingly, those provinces where female participation is higher than their male counterparts (Limpopo, KwaZulu-Natal and Eastern Cape) are those in which there is the strongest presence of rural, not-for-profit provision (the NGO type in Table 1). Age distribution is where there is greatest divergence, with public providers' modal group being pre-employed youth; whilst more than half the learners in the private sector are between 23 and 35. This reflects the larger focus on the employed and unemployed amongst private providers (Akoojee and McGrath, 2007).

⁵ See McGrath and Badroodien (2006) for a discussion of the wider Department of Labour system including the levy-grant mechanism, learnerships and sector education and training authorities.

Table 1

Private FET provider types.

Category	P1 Multi- institute	P2 Specialist institute	P3 Consultant	P4 In-house	P5 NGO	P6 LifeSkill Centre
Description	Multiple-site; multiple programme; national provider; Franchise structure likely	Single/multiple site vocationally specific provider	Non-premises based trainer/ materials developer/ intermediary	In-company training	Non-profit donor or philanthropic provider	Non-employment life skilling or leisure skilling
Learner (client)	Pre-employed; employed; un-employed	Pre-employed; employed; un-employed	Employee product training	Employee or customer training	Pre- or un- employed	Self-funded
Delivery mode	Contact or distance	Contact	Contact	Contact + electronic	Contact	Contact or electronic
Size (small <100; medium 101–499; large >500)	Large	Small/medium	Small	Small/medium	Small	Small
Premises	Premises/head office	Premises-based	Non-premises	Premises-based	Non-premises	Non- or premises-based
Skilling Nature	Multiple Reputable and well known in the field—national or international	Single-related Smaller provider; may be 'Fly by night'	Single focused Some highly reputable; may be "suitcase provider"	Single In-company	Single-related Social development	Single-focused
Skills	Employment and non-employment focus—ICT, HR, marketing, project management	Business skills training	Soft skills (HR) or specific plant-related company skilling	Soft skills or specific company related orientation	Life skills—either employment or self-employment	Life skill e.g. leisure—photographic/home cooking; essential—driving licence

See Akoojee (2007) for further discussion of this.

Staffing racial demographics suggest that private provision is outperforming public in equity terms (African—43% private; 41% public; white—39% private; 36% public). This is even starker for overall employment by gender; where the 52% female employment in the private providers compares positively with 47% in the public colleges (Powell and Hall, 2004). There are, nevertheless, gendered patterns evident with females most likely to be employed at administrative and support levels (68%), and less prevalent in management and teaching levels (46% and 43% respectively). Women are more likely to be lecturers in public colleges but are even rarer at the managerial level.

Ownership patterns suggest that the sector is becoming racially diverse, in keeping with current black economic empowerment trends. In 2003 44% of ownership was still white; 32% African; 13% Indian; and 11% coloured) (Akoojee, 2007). In keeping with our comments above, changes in the racial composition of ownership are especially pronounced for those providers responding to government and corporate sector clients, where the racial composition of ownership is a scored factor in tendering processes.

Whilst it is difficult to generalise about the highly heterogeneous private FET sector, it can be argued that there are grounds for optimism about the sustainability of much of its provision. South Africa has many who can and will pay for programmes that appear to be market relevant, even if they are only providing employability and not actual employment.

Although there has been considerable animosity towards the sector by the Department of Education, it is clear that this is not shared by the Department of Labour, which sees private providers as essential to the sustainability of its own project for skills development. Moreover, the demographic data on the sector suggests that, overall, private provision cannot be seen to be disproportionately serving the privileged. Indeed, on many of the quantitative indicators, it is ahead of public provision on equity. Thus, the private FET sector in South Africa does not appear to have any serious reasons for concern about political legitimacy and sustainability.

6. Conclusion

6.1. The fragility of the South African skills and development projects

We are writing this paper in the twilight of the Mbeki Presidency as he increasingly appears as an American-style lame duck second-term President. Of course, this moment will pass and a new President will seek to put his/her stamp on South African development. Whether a radical shift will occur remains to be seen. It is apparent, however, that the real challenge is that of achieving enough growth with enough equity, a tension that is apparent in many international experiences and in the current trajectories of the other Southern major powers: Brazil, China and India.

There is a sense within South Africa that skills are not in full crisis only because there is not enough economic growth to produce sufficient pressure but it is equally plausible to argue that there are already clear weakness of capacity, with many appearing to be underskilled in both public and private sectors. There are also clear and specific short-term skills shortages, which are symbolically and genuinely linked closely to the 2010 FIFA World Cup.

South African commentators are genuinely concerned that not enough skills are being generated to support the national development trajectory. Moreover, lurking behind such concerns is the worry that any failure to develop economically will inevitably undermine the relative successes in terms of social and political stability (albeit with serious HIV-AIDS and crime problems).

There is clear disarticulation between the short-term concerns of JIPSA and AsgiSA regarding skills for development and the main thrust of public FET college policy, which is much more medium-term and supply-side oriented. Problems of DoE–DoL disarticulation remain at the heart of the limited responsiveness of the skills system. Failures of public provision (at least in the short-term) offer even greater opportunities for private providers.

Overall, private provision lies somewhere between the 'fly-by-night' exploitation and 'provider of first choice' extremes of the popular debate. Although varying by type, private providers are often well-positioned to serve industry, particularly on

non-artisanal skills (where artisanal skills will be developed is a major concern for JIPSA and DoL). They are able to access the levy–grant system far more easily than public providers hamstrung by the DoE, and, indeed, are central to its performance. Their flexibility of delivery helps them to be best positioned to serve those in work wanting to upgrade and those adults who are out of work, groups that have largely been abandoned by the public college system. Their use of bursaries, cross-subsidisation and, in some cases, generally low fees make them well-positioned to reach poorer students, even with the introduction of NCV bursaries. Overall, they also have addressed the demographics of staff, students and owners at least as well as the public sector. Finally, they have a real opportunity to access the larger African market, particularly on the coat tails of South African transnationals.

Skills development cannot deliver national development but it can support it and help its growth and sustainability. At present, this potential is not being realised in South Africa. Public FET colleges are largely failing to deliver because of the state's own failings of strategy and implementation. At the same time, private providers are largely delivering in spite of the Department of Education (although they frequently benefit from positive relationships with the Department of Labour's levy–grant system).

There is a possibility that the state could work more smartly with both sets of providers. Crucially, however, this would necessitate working more smartly within itself. This was a major plank of the Mbeki strategy but it has failed conspicuously with regard to the Education–Labour relationship. Whether a new President can achieve a radical reworking of this relationship may be an important indicator of the viability of any new development project.

6.2. International implications

The dominant political and economic position that South Africa occupies in sub-Saharan Africa means that its internal developments will always have some implications for the rest of the region. One direct area of influence in the skills field is through migration and trade. We have already noted that South African private providers may be well placed to get work from the corporate sector in the rest of the continent. This clearly has significant implications for local providers, both public and private, and for policymakers. Equally, the complex flows of people in and out of South Africa also means that South African patterns of skills development are likely to shape the regional labour market in profound ways.

This paper also has timely messages for those seeking to respond to the renewed international interest in skills development as a way of responding to the real and imagined pressures and opportunities of globalisation.

In spite of the resources that South Africa has, it is clear that the challenge of making skills development serve national development is far from simple. After a decade and a half, successive ANC governments have not been able to deliver on an acceptable balance between growth and equity and the political sustainability of limited success looks increasingly uncertain. With the growth of democratisation in Africa in the same period, it is necessary to ask whether other African governments are any more likely to achieve a genuine combination of political, social and economic sustainability.

This should urge us to caution about assumptions that a rediscovery of vocational education and training is going magically to deliver development (cf. King et al., 2007). It has not happened in South Africa and will not happen elsewhere.

Rather, we need to be cautious and modest about what skills can do for development. Part of making this contribution larger lies

in developing policies, systems and institutions. The South African case highlights a problem that is common in Africa (and elsewhere) of parallel, or even divergent, policies and systems. Vocational education is typically under a separate Ministry from occupational training, mirroring the UNESCO–ILO split within the UN system. Vocational education is dominated by public providers, owned but frequently mismanaged by Ministries of Education; whilst occupational training has a much more complex public–private mix.

The Education–Labour split in South Africa and elsewhere will not be easy to overcome but it remains a serious barrier to viable skills strategies. Moreover, as the South African case illustrates, the existence of the split can engender a policy of non-responsiveness and non-relevance for public vocational education. Rather than building vibrant public institutions, there is a danger of consigning them to a perpetual irrelevance, in which their survival is only guaranteed by the political embarrassment of closing them down.

Our story highlights the centrality of private provision in a way that is perhaps unique in journal articles about skills in Africa. There is a degree of South African exceptionalism in the vibrancy of its private provision, fed by an atypically large market and a sizeable levy–grant system. However, the need to acknowledge and understand the composition and importance of private provision is a generalisable issue. Equally, the ways in which the South African Department of Education has inadvertently promoted private provision are worth considering by other policymakers, whatever their ideological views regarding the appropriate public–private mix.

The sustainability of national development projects in Africa is likely to continue to be problematic, and skills development will only ever be able to play a limited role in addressing this challenge. Nonetheless, governments can do more to support the sustainability of these skills development systems and need to pay attention to both public and private provision in so doing.

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