



POLICY BRIEF

Enhancing employability: What can be done to improve TVET students' chances of finding work?

Volker Wedekind

Overview

Unemployment of young people in South Africa is regarded as a crisis that needs urgent intervention. Disaffected and disillusioned youth are a potential threat to the long-term stability of the society as a whole. When graduates from institutions such as the Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges are not employable this is even more worrying as significant public money has been invested in their training. One reason cited for their failure to access the labour market is the apparent lack of 'employability skills'.

This policy brief seeks to interrogate the notion of employability skills. It draws on a number of case studies conducted as part of the Labour Market Intelligence Partnership (LMIP) that sought to understand the relationship between specific education programmes and the labour market. It problematizes the over-emphasis on employability skills, and the notion that a responsive curriculum is one that addresses employer needs. Instead the research reveals that there needs to be an interactive process between education providers and employers as equal partners. This partnership is most likely to lead to the employability of graduates.

Introduction

There is growing concern about the 'employability' of graduates from the TVET system, and particularly those that are graduating from public TVET colleges. The concern emanates from high unemployment rates

amongst young people generally, and the fact that many students with qualifications fail to find employment. Furthermore, feedback from employers suggests that many graduates do not possess the characteristics and skills that make them desirable employees. Often times, the issue is not that graduates do not possess the technical skills to do the work, but appear to lack the interpersonal, communication and attitudinal skills and dispositions that make them able to function in a workplace setting. These generic skills have been labelled ‘employability skills’, and there are increasing attempts to infuse these skills into, or add them on to, the curriculum of the college programmes. This policy brief seeks both to problematize the concept of employability skills, but equally, to move beyond critique. We propose policy interventions that may assist to address the mismatch between employer expectations, and the attributes with which graduates leave a college.

Employment, employability and skills

The concept of ‘employability’ remains a contested term and is differently understood and utilised by various stakeholders. It is useful to make some distinctions as these have implications for curriculum policy and distinguishing who does what.

Employment is the base concept. It refers to being productively occupied, usually but not necessarily for some form of remuneration, either for an employer or for one’s self. Being ‘employable’ at its simplest refers to the degree to which one can become employed. It is always a relative term as it has to be linked to a specific occupation or job. You may be employable in one kind of job, or at a particular level within an occupation, but not at other levels or in other jobs. **Employability** is therefore dependent on a complex mix of qualifications, skills and personal traits that varies from individual to individual. Thus there can never be a generic form of employability.

What has confused the discussions around employability is the use of the term ‘**employability skills**’, which refers to the specific skills for a job, to so-called ‘soft’ skills such as communication or empathy, to generic skills or to the transversal skills such as ICT skills or ‘problem solving’ or life skills (e.g. time management) usually associated with general functioning in an organisation. At times the skills needed to access employment such as CV writing or interview skills are also included in the term.

‘**Experience**’ is a key dimension in many of the discussions about employability, but often simply acts as a proxy for having demonstrated the ability to work in an organisation or team, and has little to do with the skills learned on the job.

Employers’ concerns about ‘a lack of employability skills’

What employers refer to as a ‘lack of employability skills’ relates in large measure to a poor basic education, particularly the inability to communicate effectively, work with numbers, and general knowledge. Moreover, employers appear to have a generalised concern with what can broadly be defined as the attitudes and values of young people. This includes a range of issues linked to demonstrated commitment and motivation, appropriate behaviour and presentation, willingness to undertake menial tasks, and having unrealistic expectations about promotion or remuneration. These concerns may reflect a difference in generational values. Young people today have been raised in a milieu that places far less emphasis on tradition, includes a high level of access to information, and a general culture that valorises the individual. Part of the problem is therefore a societal one. And in a globalised world, these employability issues can also be employer specific, as expectations vary greatly, dependent on occupational field or company culture. For example, the research literature shows significant differences in the working cultures of American versus Japanese versus European firms, in the same economic sector.

Who is responsible for what? The role of TVET colleges

It is unrealistic to expect TVET providers to prepare students for all the possible variations of workplace expectations, or workplace specific technologies. If they were to do so, the curriculum would be overloaded by non-technical and non-core components. However, if one distinguishes between the different component types of skills that make people employable in specific occupations, then it is possible to incorporate some of these into the curriculum and pedagogy of vocational teaching. Modelling workshops and classrooms on firms, enforcing expectations of time management and punctuality, and assessing in ways similar to workplace settings, are all realistic strategies that do not require extra curriculum space.

Indeed, separate modules such as Life Skills tend to become divorced from the workplace context, and appear to make little difference to students. For example, doing a course on writing a CV has more impact when students are actually applying for jobs than when they still have a strong student identity. Thus, timing may be more critical than simply covering a skill at some point in the curriculum.

It is also unrealistic to expect vocational education qualifications to compensate for weak foundations in basic education. Depending on occupational field, there needs to be space for testing students' level of preparedness for the technical or physical expectations of the course and occupation and, if necessary, allow students to strengthen components of their foundational knowledge.

Who is responsible for what? The role of employers

From the employer side, there is a critical role to play in making students employable and productive in the workplace. Firstly, through partnerships with education providers there is an important role for employers in shaping the curriculum and pedagogy to align expectations. However, the proviso must be that it is a **partnership**, recognising that education providers bring their own expertise to the table. Our research shows that employers do not always have a very clear long-term perspective on the skills that graduates need.

Secondly, the training of an individual to make them employable cannot end at the point of graduation, or even the point of employment. Successful companies have extensive induction and mentoring programmes. Effectively, the curriculum that the student follows continues for the early phase of their work life, and through professional development, this should be a life-long process. The more explicit such programmes, the more likely the alignment between the college and the workplace components.

This has implications for work-integrated learning or workplace-based learning: these experiential components of a curriculum need to be well thought through and integrated with other parts of the curriculum, if they are to be of value. Thus the relationship between a college and employers is critical at multiple levels and should be prioritised. However, this does not mean that employers should have a greater say in the curriculum of colleges. We cannot assume that employers are able to, and have time to provide that input, and also, that employers know what they need. Our research shows that employers tend to focus on immediate needs: they are aware of skills gaps (both job specific and generic) when they experience them. Few employers think further ahead in terms of changes in technology, economic shifts, or wider social and economic processes that may impact on their skills needs in the longer term. Consequently, both employers and education perspectives are needed.

Besides making workplace based learning more meaningful, if colleges have good links with employers, all sorts of other benefits accrue to the students. Lecturers are able to strengthen the curriculum by drawing on real-world local examples and integrate work into their teaching, thus making the students' experience more relevant. They can model the expectations of employers, and highlight the differences between

employers. But most importantly, through these linkages, trust is built up. Our research suggests that the qualifications and programmes that were understood and *trusted* by employers were the ones from which they were happy to recruit and employ students. That trust resided in the specific college or college campus and the people who taught there, and not in a national qualification alone. Thus, when faced with two graduates with the same qualification, an employer would prefer the student from a known college with which it has a relationship. Developing mechanisms that build this trust are thus critical.

Policy Implications

1. The use of the concept of 'employability skills' in policy documents should be discouraged as it is not helpful in identifying what is needed in the curriculum.
2. In reviews of existing qualifications and the development of new qualifications there should be an interrogation of the skills required for that occupation and where those skills should be picked up. What is assumed when the person enters the programme (pre-requisites), what is covered in the programme, and what is required of the employer when the student graduates, should be spelled out. Making different responsibilities explicit is helpful for all parties as it signals the limitations of what is being offered by one or other party.
3. Focusing on transitions is key in assisting students into employment. Short interventions before or after students enter into or exit from qualifications can be as important as redesigning the entire curriculum. Employers should be encouraged and assisted to develop and strengthen induction and mentoring programmes to assist new employees to make successful transitions.
4. Prioritising the development of partnerships between colleges and employers, and individual lecturers and colleagues in their profession/occupation is key. Professional development systems need first and foremost to encourage lecturers to remain in touch with workplaces so that they are able to facilitate understanding of the knowledge, attitudes and networks that can make the students employable.
5. The SETA offices in colleges could potentially be a useful facilitator that links colleges and employers. However, they should be reconceptualised as high-level positions that act as a broker between employers, the students and the lecturers/college. This would require people with counselling skills as well as a well-developed understanding of local industry and employer needs. Current practices where interns are placed in these positions do not realise the potential of these positions as a linkage mechanism.

Volker Wedekind, PhD, is Research Chair in Vocational Education and Pedagogy at the Centre for Researching Education and Labour (REAL), University of the Witwatersrand, and Honorary Associate Professor, School of Education, University of KwaZulu-Natal.



LABOUR MARKET
INTELLIGENCE PARTNERSHIP

Published in 2016 by the Labour Market Intelligence Partnership (LMIP) Project.
The LMIP project is undertaken by a research consortium led by the Human Sciences Research Council,
and is funded by the Department of Higher Education and Training.
www.lmip.org.za

Designed, typesetting and proofread by COMPRESS.dsl
www.compressdsl.com

Disclaimer

The ideas, opinions, conclusions or policy recommendations expressed in this policy brief are strictly those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent, and should not be reported as those of the HSRC-led research consortium or that of the Department of Higher Education and Training.

