



POLICY BRIEF

Responsiveness and employability: An argument for building interactive capabilities in Technical Vocational Education and Training colleges in South Africa

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Public vocational education and training (VET) institutions have long been enjoined to be more responsive to industry needs. However, this policy orthodoxy is weakly theorised. One result is that learners and providers are counselled to focus on immediate employability, and blamed for not achieving it. Another is that there is only marginal focus on how employability is impacted by the possibilities of growing decent, sustainable and productive jobs, or by current and potential patterns of globalised production. In short, the language of responsiveness highlights the importance of skills providers acting to meet the skills needs of industry, yet these needs are typically underspecified.

At the macro level internationally, there are concerns that with the rise of service work, the traditional focus of intermediate vocational institutions on technical skills has decreasing relevance. Equally, there is concern that formal sector employment more generally is either declining or lagging behind economic growth, which is a problem that has already been identified in South Africa. It is therefore necessary to understand the main contextual dynamics of specific sectors, which contribute to very different skills regimes. What are the prospects for growth in skilled, productive, sustainable intermediate level jobs in a sector that requires vocational education and training?

This policy brief engages with such questions by drawing on a case study of technical and vocational skills development in the South African sugar sector in KwaZulu Natal (KZN).

The sugar sector in KwaZulu-Natal

Concentrated in the provinces of KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumalanga, the South African sugar growing and milling sub-sector is a cost competitive producer of high quality sugar (SASA 2013). However, the global sugar market is highly distorted by subsidies and tariffs, so that scope for export growth is very constrained. Due to the bulky and perishable nature of sugar, growing and milling processes need to be located in close proximity. This has led to a close interplay between the grower sub-sector, a mixture of large and very small scale producers, and the millers, a small number of large national companies.

Over time, a strong practice of organisation independent of state efforts and institutions has emerged. Training to meet routine skills needs is concentrated in a single private TVET provider, which was established and is managed by a sugar sectoral association. Where the sugar sector does engage with public TVET, interaction with agricultural colleges in relation to the skills needs of growers is more widespread, rather than with the mainstream TVET Colleges.

Sugar is a sector where employment is slowly declining. Equally, technological change is not dramatic. Other than the technology changes due to the downstream production of by-products, the process of growing and milling sugar has not changed much over the years. The main thrust and driver of skills development is therefore on replacing one cadre of workers with another.

There are however a number of changing skills needs in the sector: the capabilities of a large pool of emerging and 'land claim' farmers targeted as potential informal small-scale producers of sugar in the two key provinces need to be built; on a smaller scale, there is a need to replace ageing, and scarce, artisanal and managerial skills.

A key question that arises is whether there is a role for public TVET providers located in the province, to meet these changing skills needs.

A role for TVET colleges?

We found that eight of the nine TVET colleges based in KZN were linked to firms in the sugar sector, but only in informal ways and in isolated instances. Only one college had structured collaboration, through a partnership for trade testing with the accredited private sector college. It was also actively linked to sugar firms in the broader Southern African region, for example, in Swaziland.

The lack of engagement was summed up by a manager at a college located on the sugar belt, who remarked that she drove past the cane fields every day and had never thought of the potential benefits of interaction for the college or her students.

In stark contrast, interaction by sugar producers with the public agricultural colleges, currently under the control of the national and provincial Departments of Agriculture, is relatively strong, and one powerful example illustrates why.

A young historically black technical college, set up in 1968, after a period of institutional turbulence, was tasked from 1996 to build its reputation and linkages as an agricultural college. The college decided to develop a Centre of Excellence for Sugar, given that it is located in the region with the largest number of small-scale cane growers nationally. It used a strategy of relying on formal collaborative arrangements and a culture of teamwork and consultation with external actors to ensure that the programmes it delivered are responsive to the local context. Now the college collaborates with sugar sector intermediaries and milling

companies to develop and deliver modules for sugar-specific training. Innovative leadership and teamwork reflect strong dynamic interactive capabilities, which were not evident in the public TVET colleges.

The lessons are clear: Agricultural colleges share goals with the sugar sector, have the competence to contribute missing expertise, and have developed dynamic interactive capabilities to become inserted into their skills and training networks.

Building TVET college responsiveness through dynamic interactive capabilities

Overall, there is a need for much caution about what public TVET can do to promote employability. Yet there are possibilities for public TVET institutions to operate within a more meaningful responsiveness framework, based on an analysis of the potential for job growth in key sectors in their local context.

For specific policy actors, there are clear ideas for how such responsiveness to routine and changing skills needs can be achieved.

DHET should move away from conceiving TVET skills planning only in terms of a centralisation-decentralisation axis of governance. The dual logics of sector and region in thinking about skills and innovation have implications for TVET college policy and planning.

DHET and its entities need to look at how colleges are expected to be responsive. The lesson of the agricultural colleges highlights that responsiveness should be more about development of capabilities, learning and interaction within wider sectoral and regional networks. This has potentially critical implications for how colleges are funded, staffed and organised, and for their degrees of autonomy.

Private and public sectoral intermediary organisations should be seen as crucial to building capacity and communication at both TVET college and sectoral levels, rather than the current tradition in which they are largely marginal, if not invisible.

If such considerations are taken seriously, it will be possible for policymakers to talk about TVET colleges that are as responsive and interactive as they are productive.



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