



## THE SWISS-SOUTH AFRICAN CO-OPERATION INITIATIVE

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### SSACI

#### ***What Can TVET Providers and Employers Do to Enhance Students' Employability?***

About eighteen months ago, while visiting a watchmaking factory in Switzerland, I watched some young apprentices, who had just completed Grade 9 at school, using CNC machines to produce small components for watches. When I remarked to the supervisor that this was a very demanding training exercise, he looked at me in astonishment and said: "We don't do training exercises here; this is a production line and these apprentices are making genuine parts for our watches." He added that it is only through such authentic work that a trainee can learn to practise his trade to the standards of industry.

This anecdote illustrates the indispensability of workplace learning to occupational competence and job-readiness. Labour-market experts commonly identify four pre-requisites for getting a job in the modern industrial workplace:

- i. technical occupational or vocational skills
- ii. current workplace experience
- iii. workplace behavioural skills
- iv. connections to employers

Of these, only the first can be acquired in a training institution. The other three require time in the workplace. So, for employability, a trainee has to spend some time doing authentic work in the industry for which he is being trained. For that reason, it seems to me that a TVET college or university of technology that offers its students no opportunities for workplace experience isn't training for employment; it's training for disappointment.

Currently, neither of the two main curricular offerings of public TVET colleges in South Africa – the N courses and the NC(V) – incorporates compulsory, on-course workplace experience for the student. To that extent, both these training programmes limit the employability of students.

Improvements are on the way. The ***White Paper for Post-School Education and Training*** unequivocally states that "Workplace learning must be seen as an integral part of qualification and programme design." The new occupational qualifications being developed by the QCTO honour this important principle by incorporating technical theory (usually imparted in the classroom), simulated practice (in a college or sheltered workplace) and mandatory on-the-job experience in an authentic workplace, *into a single, integrated qualification*. This is an important step forward for TVET in South Africa.

Of course, employers won't offer students workplace learning opportunities if they don't see benefit to their company in doing so. Fortunately, it offers a number of significant business benefits, including:

- Providing cost-effective, partially-skilled labour on demand
- Allowing the employer to cherry-pick the best trainees or students as future employees
- Reducing the risks and costs of recruiting and inducting new employees because the chosen students have been pre-exposed to the company's systems, processes, technology and culture

- Enabling the company to influence the local college curriculum by show-casing its operations as the model which students must be trained to implement, thus reducing still further the need for, and cost of, future in-service training

In other words, there's a business case for providing workplace-learning opportunities. And, in so doing, employers communicate their skills needs to the training institutions and thereby get better quality training and better value for money if they're paying for it.

The problem is, very few employers have figured this out yet. Research conducted overseas and in South Africa has shown that apprentices, interns and other learners in the workplace can generate more value than they cost. They can work at a profit. Most employers I have spoken to don't believe this. They don't see that often it is their own organisation of work-processes that is making the trainees unproductive. Yet, there are good examples of local companies – Bell Engineering is one - using their workplace learners profitably. What is required now is a sustained, well-substantiated advocacy campaign to get this key message across to more employers.

On the whole, I fear, the current system for disbursing SETA training grants aggravates the problem. What motivation does an employer have to use apprentices and other workplace learners productively if he gets a R150'000 grant whether the apprentice is productive or not? All he has is a motive to register the training contract and then provide sufficient inputs to support his claim for the grant.

We must also admit that public TVET colleges are not, at present, very responsive to employers' needs because colleges are not dependent upon industry for their income. Instead, they are heavily subsidised by the state according to their enrolment numbers and the delivery costs of the programmes and qualifications that the DHET requires them to offer. Since the industries for which the TVET colleges are supposedly training are not really their clients - merely distant end-users of their product – colleges feel no urgent need to satisfy industry needs.

I would like to see a system whereby colleges and SETAs alike must 'sing for their suppers'. They should not get guaranteed funding from the fiscus regardless of how poorly they have served industry. Instead, like the rest of us, they should be paid strictly for services rendered to the client's satisfaction.

The Minister of Higher Education and Training has initiated a far-reaching review, with ample opportunity for industry participation, of the functions and structure of the SETAs after March 2017. At his behest, too, the Treasury is analysing the cost implications of the various TVET initiatives put forward in the *White Paper*, in search of efficient and effective implementation strategies. Business should seize this rare opportunity to engage with the DHET and the Treasury, and thereby influence these far-reaching decisions.

Minister Nzimande has called for every workplace to become a training space. That's a noble and economically worthwhile objective. All of us interested in TVET have a part to play in making it reality.

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