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An examination of the vocational education and training reform debate in Southern Africa

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This paper explores the role that vocational education and training (VET) can play in Southern African responses to major socio-economic challenges. It argues that this role will be most pronounced if it is articulated within a broader educational and economic vision that is shared by a range of stakeholders in society and supported by an adequate funding base, effective information systems and qualified and motivated planners and implementers. However, it cautions that it is also important to remember that VET reform will not in itself transform economies or societies. The paper argues that there is considerable convergence within Southern Africa around 10 themes of VET reform. It argues that there is much that is of merit in the current broad package for VET transformation but that it is essential that it is carefully critiqued and that elements are adapted to national circumstances and visions.

Keywords: *Southern Africa; Vocational education and training; Policy*

Introduction

Policymakers internationally have identified the development of better technical skills as a key element of improving economic performance. Moreover, the economic imperative for skills development has been accelerated by a number of international discourses, such as those around high skills, globalisation and the knowledge economy.

Equally, a lack of skills at the individual level is widely seen as a major element in poverty. Without skills to sell on the labour market, or to make a viable living in subsistence or self-employment activities, individuals are far more likely to be in poverty (King & McGrath, 2002; McGrath, 2002).

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Over at least 35 years, VET has been very powerfully linked with the growing problem of youth unemployment. In developed countries, the expectation that VET systems could solve mounting youth unemployment developed strongly in the 1970s as these economies went into a period of serious economic weakness that ended the full employment era of the 1950s and 1960s. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, VET systems were being revolutionised in these countries, most spectacularly in the Anglophone countries (Crouch, Finegold & Sako, 1999; Wolf, 2002).

In the Southern African region there is evident concern regarding the need for reform of VET. This paper reviews recent experiences relating to such reform in seven countries in the region: Botswana, Lesotho, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa and Swaziland. In so doing, it summarises the analysis provided by us in a recent edited volume (Akoojee, Gewer & McGrath, 2005).

These countries were selected primarily as the neighbouring countries to South Africa, from whence the project originated. The four small 'Boleswana' states have been very closely linked, historically, to their far larger and more powerful neighbour. Mozambique's development path and relationship with the rest of the region was given distinctive shape by its Portuguese colonial past and this provides a valuable difference when examining VET in the region. Since the end of the South African-inspired civil war, Mozambique has increasingly become part of the Anglophone community of Southern Africa and so is converging with its neighbours, although from a very different point of origin. Mauritius stands out from the other countries in the study geographically, located as it is in the Indian Ocean. Nonetheless, it is a member of the Southern African Development Community. What makes Mauritius particularly interesting for this study is the way in which it manifests many of the same policy trends as the other six countries but does so from a context of a relatively successful small island state.

The study is located intellectually in the tradition of sociological or political economy accounts of skills development systems. As such it can be located in the same broad canon as several other comparative studies of VET in the past decade (e.g. Ashton & Green, 1996; Crouch, Finegold & Sako, 1999; Brown, Green & Lauder, 2001; King & McGrath, 2002). Crucially, it does not take the claims for VET at face value but neither does it repeat the current orthodoxy of certain donors of downplaying a role for VET in development.

Understanding the extent and limits of regional convergence in VET policy

The countries of Southern Africa have shown significant levels of parallel development in their VET systems over the past decade and this process looks likely to continue for the foreseeable future. Indeed, it can be argued that there is an emerging model of VET reform in the region that is analogous to the description of 'flying geese' for the model of East Asian development. The countries of Southern Africa are not all at the same point along a path towards a transformed VET system. In some (South Africa and Mauritius) the transformation is well into an implementation phase; in others implementation (Namibia and Botswana) is

beginning; whilst in yet others (Swaziland, Mozambique and Lesotho) the policy debate is on-going or even just starting.

To say that there is considerable convergence between countries is not to claim that they are following identical policies. It does not mean that there are not important historical legacies. For instance, the uniqueness in the context of this study of Mozambique's Portuguese colonial experience and its civil war should be noted, as should the way that the legacy of Apartheid has led to a strong focus on access and equity in Namibia and South Africa. It also does not deny the reality that national stakeholders, political dynamics and economic contexts have a powerful effect in the adoption, adaptation and rejection of certain elements of a broad international (or at least Anglophone) discourse of VET reform (Ashton & Green, 1996).

Equally, it does not suggest that international agencies and international ideas have forced a blueprint for VET transformation on helpless African governments. International ideas and agencies (such as the World Bank, the German Agency for Technical Cooperation and the International Labour Office—see McGrath, 2002 for a review of key agency policy themes regarding skills development) have clearly been very influential. However, there are significant differences between their general positions on the elements of transformation and their particular advice in different country contexts. National governments in the region continue to have considerable autonomy in choosing which elements of advice to take from which agencies.

What we do want to argue in this paper is that there are a series of key elements in a regional debate about VET that have some salience for all seven countries. It is through an exploration of these themes that we will identify some of the major challenges facing further progress in VET transformation in the region. These are areas where there is potential for individual countries to learn from each other. However, in so doing it will be important that they remember that it is dangerous simply to attempt the adoption of approaches from other countries. Rather, what is required is an adaptation that shows an awareness of both the context in which the initial experience took place and that in which the new adaptation will be grounded.

In the rest of this paper we will focus on three types of issues for Southern African VET systems. First, we will ask what the overall vision of VET is and should be and why transformation is seen as essential. Second, we will explore the place of VET in a broader policy environment—specifically through its relationships to economic and educational policy. Third, we will raise 10 of the major debates in VET policy and sketch elements of their playing out in the region.

Why VET?

Internationally VET systems tend to try to address two main challenges (Crouch, Finegold & Sako, 1999). First, they focus on addressing the problem of youth unemployment. The origins of this concern in Africa lie in the period of post-independence educational expansion, which increasingly outstripped the expansion of the formal labour market. Of course, this debate is not simply an African one.

However, where many African versions of the debate have differed from those in developed countries is in the stress placed on self-employment and the informal economy as an important part of the solution. We will return to this issue later in this paper.

Second, VET systems seek to provide skills development geared to current and projected economic opportunities and challenges. There has been a huge growth in attention to this issue in developed countries in the last quarter of a century as the policy community has become increasingly concerned about the implications for education and training of the perceived transition towards a global knowledge economy. This issue has received less attention in much of Africa where notions of a knowledge economy seem far-off and far-fetched. However, all seven countries (especially Mauritius) do show a growing interest in new skills needs for a new economy whether that is an increasingly industrial one (as reflected in the growth of textile industries in Lesotho and Swaziland) or an informational one (as in the Mauritian vision of a 'cyber island').

Inevitably, there is a challenge for national systems in managing the potential tensions between these two objectives and in developing coherent strategies for addressing them (Crouch, Finegold & Sako, 1999). Moreover, a range of authors (e.g. Williams & Raggatt, 1998; Keep, 1999; Payne, 2000; Guile, 2002) highlight that the new economy is not necessarily one that brings high skill for all.

For Southern African countries there may be sound reasons for seeking niches within the increasingly globalised and knowledge-driven economy but skills development for these will need to be balanced against the realisation that such niches are likely only to provide employment for a small proportion of the economically active population (King & McGrath, 2002). Equally, it may be difficult to know whether current niches are sustainable, as in the case of the growth of textile industries in Lesotho and Swaziland as a result of the *African Growth and Opportunities Act*.

The hard question to be asked in several of the seven countries under consideration is whether they in fact have a clear vision for their VET systems. Lesotho and Swaziland, for instance, appear to be struggling to agree such a vision as they currently move slowly towards new policies.

Even where there may be a clear internal vision within the relevant department or agency, it may not be well understood by the broader policy community, both within and outside government. Mauritius stands out in this regard as an example of a country that has sought to develop such a shared vision, built very consciously on lessons from East Asia.

A vision in itself also is not enough. Clearly, it is essential that such a vision can be manifested in a VET system that does meet the shifting needs of learners, employers and the national economy. There appears to be a consensus across a wide range of stakeholders in the seven countries that VET transformation is necessary, although the sophistication of this vision varies.

However, it is important to briefly interrogate this consensus rather than taking it as self-evident. An entirely plausible, and lengthy, list of weaknesses of VET systems

can be produced. VET provision is costly and many graduates do not get formal employment. Some VET curricula are very old and some infrastructure is even older and more worn-out. The range of programmes often appears to have little to do with existing and potential labour market opportunities.

Equally, it is important to raise three health warnings about VET reform in the Southern African context. First, a better, even a far better, VET system may not have dramatic positive effects on employment, growth and competitiveness (Ashton & Green, 1996; Wolf, 2002) or poverty. These indicators are shaped by a far more complex set of factors and interactions.

Second, VET reform must be seen in part as an ideological project. On the one hand, the previous point about the potentially limited impact of VET reform on economic performance has led a number of authors to suggest that part of the attraction of VET reform is because politicians can then be seen to be doing something about issues such as employment and competitiveness (e.g. Keep, 1999, Payne, 2000; Wolf, 2002). On the other, many specific elements of the VET reform package have emerged out of the ideological certainty of neoliberalism, most notably from the World Bank of the early 1990s. Some of the issues to be discussed later in the paper, such as autonomy for public institutions and the role of private providers are not value-free good practices but are based at least as much in belief as experience. Indeed, there is considerable evidence from countries such as the UK, the USA and Australia that questions the practical success of such policies (Harkin, 1997; Falk, 1998; Keep, 1999; Unwin, 2003).

Third, it must also be remembered that any likely impact for VET in the region is constrained by the tiny size of most of the national systems. Whilst the South African government can plausibly plan to have one million learners in its public further education and training colleges by the end of the decade and even larger numbers accessing the Department of Labour's system, other systems can be counted in the thousands. Namibia, for instance, had total enrolments of less than 2000 learners in all its Vocational Training Centres in 2002, whilst the whole systems in Lesotho and Swaziland are of a similar size.

VET in a broader policy context

VET needs to be seen as a means to multiple ends. It does not exist in isolation from other policies but is intended to respond to, and is shaped by, broader policy imperatives and trends. The range of possible interactions is complex, including areas such as science and technology policy and social development. However, here we will focus only on two key interactions: with economic strategy and with educational policy.

Articulation between VET and economic strategies and realities

At its heart VET is supposed to prepare learners for the world-of-work. This can be manifested in different ways: in programmes for youth yet to enter the

labour market, aimed at both formal and informal sector employment and self-employment; in courses targeted at employed workers seeking new or improved skills in response to technological changes; or in retraining programmes for those who have become unemployed. All such programmes require that relevant skills and knowledge be developed for the current, and likely future, shape of the economy. However, this is an area in which VET systems internationally have come under severe criticism. Therefore, it is important to consider the extent to which countries have strong national information systems and effective national fora through which economic and VET strategies can be aligned.

Such an information system is relatively well-developed in South Africa (Macun, 2001; Kraak, 2004) and Mauritius, whilst Swaziland's 2003 National Skills Survey shows a national appreciation of the importance of improved information about skills utilisation patterns. However, across the region more generally, concerns remain about the evidential basis on which decisions about VET provision are made.

Structures to articulate human resources development (which includes VET) with overall economic strategy are best represented by the multi-stakeholder Human Resources Development (HRD) Council, established by a new Act in Mauritius in 2003. Similar bodies are planned in some other countries. South Africa has a HRD Coordinating Committee at present, which is entirely comprised of government stakeholders, although there are proposals for a broader stakeholder body. South Africa also has a cluster system for government departments that is designed to promote cross-sectoral coherence.

Whilst some economies in the region are showing some impressive economic statistics, it is clear that a number of serious socio-economic challenges remain across all seven countries. There is a general regional unemployment crisis, with figures ranging from around 10% in Mauritius to nearly 40% in South Africa (on the broad definition). The burden of unemployment falls especially upon youth and the rural populace. The region has particularly serious problems arising from several of the highest global rates of income inequality, and this is closely related to a high incidence of poverty. These take Apartheid-influenced spatial and racial forms in Namibia and South Africa, whilst Mozambique faces a particular challenge of post-war rehabilitation.

The region is one of worst global locations too for the HIV/AIDS pandemic (with the exception of Mauritius). Strikingly, this has resulted in declining Human Development Indices in several countries. Botswana and South Africa were highlighted in the 2003 Human Development Report (UNDP, 2003) for being the second and third worst countries globally in respect of the gap between their wealth and human development rankings, largely because of HIV/AIDS.

The labour market impact of this is still poorly understood. However, one implication that the International Labour Office shows is that of falling labour market participation rates. It estimates that male labour force participation fell by 16 percentage points between 1995 and 2002 in South Africa and by the same amount between only 1995 and 1997 in Lesotho, whilst Botswana experienced a 23% fall between 1995 and 1999 (ILO, 2003). The International Labour Office has also

suggested that skilled labour is relatively badly affected (ILO, 2001). This adversely affects output and places increased burdens on education and training systems. Moreover, the burden of dealing with HIV/AIDS is likely to depress corporate and family investments in education and training (Bennell, 2000).

In the face of these socio-economic challenges, there is an unevenness of economic response. All countries in the region can be argued to be at different points on a trajectory from a resource-based economy. The most diversified economy is South Africa, where economic diversification has been an on-going process for more than a century, but where the economy still bears a heavy imprint of its former reliance on the minerals sector (Fine & Rustonjee, 1996; Altman & Meyer, 2003). Mauritius can be seen as being in a second phase of diversification, having moved from a sugar plantation economy through export processing to a new focus on information and communication technologies. For the rest, they are largely in the early stages of diversification from mineral or agricultural bases. This has often brought limited success to date, although Lesotho and Swaziland have been able to take some advantage from the US *African Growth and Opportunities Act* in developing textiles industries. It is important that national VET systems better reflect the challenges and opportunities that such economic responses bring.

Articulation between VET and the broader education and training system

VET is only one part of a large education and training system. This raises issues about the appropriate education levels at which VET should be offered. The levels at which VET is offered clearly relate to decisions about the likely employment opportunities and on-going skills development needs at differing skills levels. It is important to consider whether national VET systems have clear strategies for meeting low, intermediate and high skills needs.

Decisions about the positioning of VET provision lead on to questions about the optimal configuration of entry and exit points between VET and general education. It is important to consider whether VET systems should have formal educational requirements for entry or whether there is a place for recognition of prior learning. It is also important to ask what the appropriate base in terms of education, age and experience is for different levels. Whether VET qualifications permit learners to re-enter the academic stream, and at what level, is also increasingly a focus of attention for policy. The regional commitment to National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF) means that all these issues will need to be addressed in those countries that have not yet come to firm conclusions through their NQF development experiences.

Inevitably, there must also be difficult decisions made about the relative levels of funding for VET and for primary, secondary and tertiary education. VET systems have typically been a rather minor element of overall educational expenditure in the region. The international trend towards greater importance for VET implies that this needs to be revisited. More importantly, it is evident that much of the VET transformation agenda is highly expensive. Whilst the agenda also highlights the need for greater cost recovery from learners and higher employer contributions,

there may well be considerable extra pressure on the public purse, at least in the short term. However, in differing ways in each country in the study, this greater claim from VET will need to be balanced against the desire to improve the levels of basic education enrolments (as in Mozambique, for example); concerns about the quality of secondary education (particularly in Mathematics and Science in the cases of Namibia and South Africa); attrition rates at the secondary level (as in Lesotho, Mauritius and Swaziland); or a desire to expand the university sector to meet perceived high skills needs (as in Botswana and South Africa).

Ten issues in VET policy and practice in Southern Africa

System coherence

National VET systems in the region have tended to develop in an unsystematic way. After independence, many countries built new public institutions through the support of donors. The presence of multiple donors in a country resulted in a series of loosely articulated institutions that often reflected strongly their German, Danish or British partial funding and staffing. NGOs or churches established other institutions, typically as they became aware of regional gaps in provision or concerned about issues such as youth unemployment and rural development. A number of Ministries built their own institutions, which operate largely autonomously from the main system, such as agricultural and nursing colleges.

Indeed, often there is not one system, but two largely separate systems under the control of Ministries of Education and Labour, as is seen in countries such as Botswana, Lesotho, Mozambique and Swaziland. In South Africa the system has evolved in a particularly unusual way with the Department of Education responsible (in partnership with nine provinces) for 50 institutions that are essentially funded and regulated separately from a Department of Labour system that is more closely aligned with private providers.

This lack of system coherence may be inevitable but there appear to be advantages in reducing and better managing the incoherence. Often it reflects a gap between a training and an education philosophy, which also reflects a division between theory and practice, and between an education-oriented and an employer-oriented model (although VET provision is often criticised for its weaknesses in both domains). The duality is particularly problematic if it results in a situation such as that occurring presently in South Africa where public provision under Education needs funding for upgrading (funds which the Labour system has) and the Labour system blames delays in delivery partly on a lack of providers (which the Education system has).

The best way to ensure coherence between such systems is a complex issue and different countries have varying experiences in this regard. At the heart of the complexity is the reality that decisions will be strongly shaped by political considerations, not least the relative influence of the two Ministers and their senior civil servants. Often 'umbrella' agencies are proposed that should be independent from both Ministries. However, experience shows that these are not necessarily a complete solution—a point we will return to in later discussions.

National Qualifications Frameworks

One potential tool for greater system coherence is a National Qualifications Framework (NQF). Moreover, NQFs offer the possibility of greater coherence of all education and training provision, although the emergent Botswanan model is beginning life as a National Vocational Qualification Framework before seeking to include schools and universities within its ambit. There may be merits in such an incremental approach (also present in countries such as Scotland) as opposed to attempts to build a full NQF in one go, as in South Africa.

There is commitment from the Southern African Development Community to a Regional Qualifications Framework and a series of NQFs. South Africa's NQF was enacted in 1995 and Namibia's in 1996; whilst that of Mauritius dates to 2002 and Botswana's is in early development. However, the level of understanding regarding the implications of this commitment appears very limited in those countries that are yet to introduce an NQF (Lesotho, Mozambique and Swaziland).

For all the talk about NQFs in the region, progress on the ground remains very limited. Indeed, this points to one of the clearest lessons about NQFs—the time and effort that must be expended in getting them to work. Moreover, the evidence from the most developed system, that of South Africa, is far from compelling about the attractiveness of an NQF for neighbouring countries. Ten years after the *South African Qualifications Authority Act*, SAQA remains seriously under-resourced. The public VET providers are still using qualifications designed prior to 1994 rather than new NQF-aligned ones, and take-up of new awards is very small (Paterson, McGrath & Badroodien, 2005). Particular challenges are likely to exist in funding and managing such systems in ways that would be sustainable in poorer countries.

National training authorities

National training authorities have been seen in the international policy literature as a way of breaking the dual role of Ministries in provision and regulation (Johanson & Adams, 2004), as part of the broader ideological thrust to reduce the role of the state in VET. They also have the potential to act as an umbrella agency, free from domination by either Education or Labour ministries, although this rarely happens in practice (Johanson & Adams, 2004). Such agencies exist in Botswana, Mauritius, Namibia and South Africa, but they take on different forms.

The World Bank recommends that authorities should be autonomous, have significant employer representation and decision-making powers (Johanson & Adams, 2004). It is also generally seen that such agencies need to have financial autonomy through levy funds (present or planned in Botswana, Lesotho, Mauritius, Namibia and South Africa), or some other independent source. Otherwise, there is concern that they may be too subject to government interference.

However, there appears to be some hesitance in some countries about adopting the full model. The National Skills Authority in South Africa, for instance, has only advisory powers and its Chief Operating Officer is a Department of Labour official. Across the region, National Training Authorities remain new and largely untested.

Major challenges for the future are likely to include ensuring their capacity and financial sustainability, as well as establishing their appropriate role in the overall VET system. The appropriate level of autonomy in each country will need to be established.

Finance

VET systems are relatively expensive. Especially in the technical subject areas as they are reliant on costly infrastructure and require low learner: instructor ratios. They also have been widely criticised for their lack of efficiency (e.g. World Bank, 1991; Middleton, Zideman & Adams, 1993; Johanson & Adams, 2004). Indeed, it was on the grounds of their low rates of return and high cost that many agencies have justified their reduction of support to VET systems since the beginning of the 1990s. It is clearly important that the efficiency and effectiveness of VET systems in the region be addressed, but not to the expense of other considerations as is the tendency in some international policy writings.

Adequate finance is crucial to the development of high quality VET systems and for the achievement of many elements of the VET transformation agenda. However, many VET systems and sub-systems in the region remain highly dependent upon state funding. This is clearly the case for Lesotho, Mozambique and Swaziland, and for the Education components of the Botswanan and South African systems. Until the levy system comes into full operation, it is also the case for Namibia. This dependence is particularly problematic as VET continues to be accorded a low priority amongst the conflicting claims on education budgets in these countries, and as such, aid to VET continues to be limited.

Levies can be an important source of funding for training and different models have been adopted or are planned within the region. The South African model shows an interesting blend of a national strategic fund and a sectorally-organised levy-grant system, whilst other models lack a sectoral focus. Whilst levies can generate large amounts of money in countries with relatively large formal sectors such as Mauritius and South Africa, it is less clear how well they can function in very small countries with very small formal sectors, such as Lesotho and Swaziland.

There is also debate as to how effective levy-grant systems are in stimulating new training. Indeed, concerns have been raised in South Africa that too many employers continue to treat the levy as a tax and that the levy-grant system has not led to a change in the national training culture. However, it must be remembered that the levy only began in 2000.

We have also noted the current problems facing public providers in accessing the system in South Africa. These issues need to be taken into account when developing levy systems, as is being considered in Lesotho. Whether or not a levy model is introduced, it is clear that systems such as those of Lesotho, Mozambique and Swaziland need to access greater employer contributions. However, this may not be easy. Indeed, it may be worth remembering that many developed countries are

seeing a general shift of the burden for initial training onto learners and the state and away from employers (Crouch, Finegold & Sako, 1999; Wolf, 2002).

The funding problems of VET systems have also led to greater encouragement of public providers to cover more of their costs through their own fund raising. This is clearly in keeping with the vision of them becoming more business-like. There are three other main sources of funding that providers are increasingly identifying.

First, there is increasing fees. Whilst VET learners in the public system were once either apprentices or having their places paid for by the state, they are now increasingly private candidates paying full or only partially subsidised fees. In countries such as South Africa and Swaziland there has been a strong upward pressure on fees. Indeed, they doubled between 2003 and 2004 in Swaziland. What makes the case of Swaziland even more striking is that these fees are not retained by the institution but are remitted to the central Treasury, from which an institutional grant is then disbursed. As we will discuss below, the growth in fees is likely to negatively impact on equity and access.

Second, there is fund raising through sale of products and services. Elements of training with production are most notable in the parts of systems where NGOs are working in partnership with government, such as the Brigades of Botswana and the Community Skills Development Centres of Namibia, where the interest is partly philosophical on the part of those particular NGOs (Biervliet, 1994). However, training with production also takes place in state institutions, such as those in Swaziland (although again funds go to the central Treasury). Nonetheless, concerns have been raised about the desirability of training with production, both because it can tend towards production overwhelming training, and because of the unfair competition that can result when subsidised public institutions start producing in the same areas as local enterprises (King, 1985; McGrath *et al.*, 1995).

Third, there is provision of training at full cost for employers, typically through the delivery of short courses tailored to their needs. There is very little of this in the region, and in some countries it would be seen as inappropriate behaviour for public institutions, already recipients of state funds. Such offerings are developing in South Africa, however, and appear likely to grow quite rapidly in the medium-term. There do appear to be merits in expanding this approach across the region, although it will be important to balance such programmes with overall institutional and system-wide missions. In doing so, Southern African public providers and system planners might do well to reflect on the problems of the English college sector in the mid-1990s where some colleges moved to provide large numbers of programmes of dubious quality to industry with little consideration of educational merit (Rospigliosi, 2000).

Curricular reform

One of the most common criticisms of public VET is that it has curricula that are outdated both in terms of learning theory and relevance to industry. This is a message that has been widely accepted within the region, at least in principle. There has been growing attention to the importance of making curricula more responsive

to the needs of industry and more focussed on promoting the employability of graduates across all seven countries. Competency-based modular training has been introduced in a number of countries and core skills are beginning to be considered. The NQF revolution in the region will, necessarily, further such processes.

However, it is apparent that the process of curriculum reform is challenging. At different rates, each country in the study is having to address the international trend towards the growth of the service economy and the new pressures that this places on VET provision. As Gamble (2004) notes, this does not simply mean the introduction of new subject areas but also entails a realisation that service sector skills are often built on a very different foundation of knowledge than are craft skills. Making informed decisions about new subject areas and new curricula is not easy, and employer and union participation cannot be assumed even where it is sought.

The greater development of the NQF process in South Africa has raised concerns about the appropriate balancing of educational and employer interests in the new VET curriculum (Young, 2003b; DoE and DoL, 2003). South Africa has also seen a debate about the appropriate structure of new qualifications between those that favour the currently-dominant unit standards approach and those that favour whole qualifications as the key focus.

It is also evident that capacity for curriculum development is often very weak and will be put under severe pressure by the need to align all curricula with new NQFs. Again, the South African experience of the problems of structures Standards Generating Bodies and National Standards Bodies (Cosser, 2001) and the proposals for radical reforms to the model need to be carefully studied elsewhere in the region.

Equity and access

Public VET systems are widely seen as having a duty to provide access to all citizens. Racial disparities in access, most pronounced under Apartheid in Namibia and South Africa, have largely been eradicated. However, in some cases, such as Mozambique, there are major spatial inequalities in access, most notably a large urban bias. Gender biases in access to VET generally, and gender stereotyping in enrolment in particular courses, are still pronounced across the region.

Moreover, across the region, other forms of unequal access are evident. VET institutions are beginning to address equity issues around disability and HIV status but efforts are generally unsystematic to date. They remain particularly weak on developing awareness programmes, although some examples such as Lesotho's HIV/AIDS programme have emerged. Those planning equity programmes need to be mindful of the potential gap between pro-equity innovations in the VET system and the continuation of less progressive practices by employers. It is important that learners are not given false hope of employment and that innovations at the VET level inform policies for employment.

It is also important to note that there is a potential tension between the tendency towards greater cost recovery and the imperative of widening access to VET. Poorer students are clearly disadvantaged when fees are increasing rapidly, as with the

doubling of fees in Swaziland at the start of 2004. VET learners typically cannot access bursary funds, even where these exist for higher education learners.

There has been little progress in the area of distance learning to date across the region's public VET systems. Although the South African merger process was supposed to encourage institutions to explore new modes of delivery, there are few examples of innovation at present in this regard. Moreover, the one dedicated distance provider, Technisa, remains underfunded and largely marginal to changes within the broader college system.

A focus on the informal economy

One of the biggest trends in the VET literature on Africa since the late 1980s has been an emphasis on training for the informal economy. However, this appears to have had far less impact on Southern African VET systems than elsewhere on the continent.

The region typically has less developed informal economies than in other parts of Africa. Nonetheless, it is clear that (self) employment in the informal economy is the likely destination of many VET graduates. Even in South Africa those in informal work are estimated as being as many as four million, or approximately one-third of the labour force (ILO, 2002). The relative proportion of those in the informal economy is far greater in several other countries in the region.

However, there is often limited understanding of the nature of skills required in the informal economy and a lack of systematic addressing of the skills needs of both those already in the informal economy and those likely to enter it (McGrath, 2005). The greatest focus has often been in NGO programmes such as those in Botswana and Namibia. However, even here the adequacy of preparation and the degree of labour market analysis can be questioned. South Africa has sought to intervene in smaller enterprises through its National Skills Fund. This has had some impact but the reach and quality of interventions has been very limited (McGrath, 2005).

It will be important that more attention be paid to skills development for the informal economy in the region. However, in doing so it will be crucial that the difficulties of interventions of this kind are understood. This may require a closer examination of experiences elsewhere in Africa whilst remaining mindful of the very different contexts involved. The latter will require the development of strong situational analyses of the informal economies of the region.

It is also important to remember the great difficulty inherent in trying to take youth and make them successfully self-employed. International evidence shows clearly that success in self-employment is strongly influenced not only by skills but also by capital, experience and networks (McGrath *et al.*, 1995; King & McGrath, 2002; McGrath, 2005). The typically long process of becoming successfully self-employed cannot easily be accelerated.

Making public providers more business-like

There has been considerable international policy advice to the region stressing the desirability of making public provider institutions more like businesses, mirroring broader international trends. This has been a central theme of VET reform discussions since the World Bank's paper on *Vocational and Technical Education and Training* in 1991, and has been reinforced by other agencies such as the International Labour Office (Grierson & McKenzie, 1996).

In particular, this advice stresses the desirability of stronger decision-making and fund-raising powers for institutions. The beginnings of a national debate in this regard can be seen in the more centralised VET systems of the region (Lesotho, Mozambique and Swaziland). The process of granting greater autonomy to public providers is already further developed in the other countries, most notably Mauritius and South Africa, whilst more tentatively in Botswana and Namibia.

However, national Ministries rightly have to balance such arguments against the importance of central leadership and delivery on national goals and this remains a concern even in those systems where autonomy has gone furthest. For instance, the South African Department of Education retains a strong belief in the legitimacy of the post-Apartheid state and the need for it to intervene to ensure equity and redress in the face of local conservatism and, even, racism (Adams, Mabunda & McGrath, 2005).

None of the countries of the region looks likely, in the foreseeable future, to allow the degree of institutional autonomy that is to be found in some countries such as England or Scotland. Indeed, what constitutes the correct level of autonomy needs to be decided upon according to each national context.

Even where it is decided that greater autonomy is desirable, the extent of institutional capacity for self-management needs to be carefully considered, and a strategy for its enhancement put in place. South Africa has invested considerable sums of money in building management and governance capacities within its 50 newly merged institutions and it appears that the process is likely to be on-going for a considerable period of time. It is likely that the challenge of institutional capacity development may be even greater and longer term in some other countries in the region. Greater institutional autonomy also impinges on the work of national (and in South Africa, provincial) bureaucracies. Part of the capacity development challenge lies in equipping and orienting officials for new, more facilitatory, roles, if these are deemed desirable.

The role of private providers

In a number of countries in the region, private-not-for-profit providers have played an important role in the evolution of VET provision. This has included the role of NGOs in setting up community-based skills provision, as in the Botswanan and Namibian examples already mentioned. Churches have also played a significant role in provision in countries such as Lesotho and Swaziland. In such cases, there has tended to be a relatively good relationship between the state and the non-profit

providers (although the relationship of the Brigades and the Ministry of Education in Botswana has not always been positive) and their institutions have often become state-aided.

The role of private-for-profit providers has been more contentious. Again, the World Bank has led the way in international advice recommending a greater role for private providers (World Bank, 1991). Claims are made for the greater efficiency and responsiveness of such providers as compared to public institutions and it is argued that they should be free from excessive regulatory requirements and should be able to access state funding.

In practice, little is known about the size and scope of private provision in most countries in the region (but see Mudariki *et al.*, 1997 for Botswana and Akoojee, 2005 for South Africa), although the international tendency towards urban location and a focus on commercial and computing subjects does appear to hold to a large extent across the region (Atchoarena & Esquieu, 2002).

In spite of the international arguments in favour of private provision, many national officials appear either hostile or indifferent to such institutions. It is important to consider the extent to which such hesitations are justifiable. Across the region, there is an apparent need for clearer policies and strategies for regulation.

Where skills levies exist, it is sometimes possible for private providers to access state funds, as in Mauritius and South Africa. However, the South African experience to date clearly shows the problems that can be caused by a separation of funding and regulation systems between Departments of Education and Labour.

The Status of VET

One of the greatest challenges for VET in the region is a continuation of its low status in the eyes of many learners, parents, employers and policymakers. It is a problem that seems particularly pressing for the pre-vocational systems of countries such as Lesotho, Mauritius and Swaziland.

This problem has its roots in the colonial system where academic education was the route to modernity, social status and relative prosperity. Particularly in South Africa and Namibia, it was also apparent that black access to such education was deliberately limited during the colonial period, further building demand for academic provision. A rational preference for academic education continued in the early independence period due to the better employment and income prospects it offered. Although the economic rationality of such a position appears less certain in the current era, there does appear to be a strong continued legacy.

Some proponents of NQFs argue that one of their key advantages is that they address the parity of esteem problem between academic and vocational education. However, it is clearly over-simplistic and naïve to think that the status of academic and vocational education is equalised simply by conflating qualifications. Indeed, the challenge of VET's poor status is not easily solved, as the promotion of attitudinal change is highly complex. The most powerful potential contributors to a change in VET's status would be an improvement in VET quality and in the placement of VET learners in decent and well-remunerated work.

Conclusion

VET can play an important role in Southern African responses to major socio-economic challenges. However, this role will be most pronounced if it is articulated within a broader educational and economic vision that is shared by a range of stakeholders in society and supported by an adequate funding base, effective information systems and qualified and motivated planners and implementers (essentially, a high skills approach: Brown, Green & Lauder, 2001; Ashton, 2005).

Countries across the region are becoming more accepting of the need to develop their VET systems in ways that respond to, and even anticipate, economic trends. However, there is still often little sense within government education and training bureaucracies of where the economy is going in the face of globalisation, technological changes and the vagaries of developed countries trade and aid policies. Nonetheless, South Africa and Mauritius do provide examples of countries with well-developed industrial and micro-economic policies that are beginning to have an impact on VET delivery.

However, such reforms may be necessary but not sufficient for socio-economic transformation in the region. Of more importance will be the ability of countries to achieve or sustain high growth paths and to do this in a socially inclusive manner.

Whilst all seven countries show broadly similar thinking about VET reform, they reflect national specificities in the implementational speed and interpretation of the reform agenda. In areas such as institutional autonomy and the development of national training authorities there is an entirely expected gap between the international discourse and the enthusiasm of some politicians and officials for these reforms. This does not simply reflect conservatism and self-interest but also, to some extent, a legitimate questioning of what local autonomy might mean in particular circumstances. Nowhere is this more pertinent than in South Africa where a broadly legitimate state has well-founded concerns about local resistance to reform.

Many of the elements of the reform package are yet to show much in the way of clear evidence for their success in countries where the reforms are more advanced and this should serve as a warning against the unthinking implementation of reforms in other settings. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the case of the regional belief in national qualification frameworks. The evidence for success here is very limited, and the oldest system, that of South Africa, has been in a stalled reform process for four years to date.

Whilst there is much that is of merit in the current broad package for VET transformation, it is essential that it is carefully critiqued and that elements are adapted to national circumstances and visions. In all of the 10 areas of the transformation agenda discussed here there are valuable experiences from across the region that other countries can learn from. Although some countries are further along the road towards a full transformation of their VET systems it is clear that they have had to refine certain elements of their approaches and may need to revisit others. Thus, these countries may still be in a position to gain new insights from how

others are trying to learn from what they perceive to be the mistakes, as well as the successes, of those at the head of the flying geese formation.

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