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# No higher education or good jobs without ‘normal’ university matric pass

*By Seamus Needham*

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*In 2013, all post-school training courses – from colleges to universities, in both private and public sectors – were combined under the tattered umbrella of the Department of Higher Education and Training. SEAMUS NEEDHAM looks at the evidence on how this new system has helped young people to either find jobs or places in universities, and comes to a sobering and disappointing conclusion. Students without a ‘normal’ matric certificate have little or no chance of entry into higher education and are very unlikely to ever find a decent job. The*

*author considers the policy implications of these findings.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (DHET, 2013) led to the consolidation of all institutions in South Africa’s public post-school education and training sector under the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). South Africa’s public post-school education and training sector consists of universities, universities of technology (the old ‘technikons’), Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Colleges, Community Education and Training Colleges (CETCs), Sectoral Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) and the National Skills Fund. Post-school education and training is defined in the 2013 White Paper as a sector for any learners not in formal secondary school education, no matter when they left formal schooling. This article looks at the efficacy of South Africa’s post-school education and training sector through

considering ways in which students are able (or not) to navigate paths to further learning and the world of work. The article draws on the author’s previous and ongoing research on what he refers to as “articulation pathways” – means by which young people can move from where they are to a decent job or a university-level degree.

The most common route to public higher education is by undergoing 12 years of formal schooling and subsequently competing to enter South Africa’s 23 universities. Van der Berg (2017) notes the high rates of return from university education. Graduates earn up to four times more than matriculants. Unemployment of university graduates remains low. The majority of successful university graduates are students who have received an education from wealthy schools (Quintile 5 schools such as Groote Schuur or Westerford in the top 20% of areas by household income). There is a significant drop-out rate from public senior secondary schools, with most of these students leaving

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school between grades 10-12. They join many others looking for the elusive “articulation pathway” that will take them to a better life.

For students who do not have grades from their National Senior Certificate that qualify them to enter universities, TVET Colleges offer opportunities for further studies. TVET Colleges offer three mainstream programmes, namely the National Certificate (NATED) N1-N6 programmes, the National Certificate Vocational (NCV) programmes from National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Level 2 (Grade 10) to NQF Level 4 (Grade 12) as well as a range of occupational and skills programmes. However, to get in students need to have passed at least Grade 9.

Entrance requirements for the NCV are a 50% pass in Maths and English and 70% for admissible core subjects. While legislation is in place for NCV graduates to access universities, there is minimal evidence of them doing so (SAQA, 2017). While a South African



Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Baseline Study on Articulation (2017) shows evidence of students with N6 qualifications entering universities of technology, this is similarly limited. A key challenge faced by TVET graduates is that many have already achieved a Grade 12 school qualification and NCV qualifications that are equivalent to a National Senior Certificate. The NATED N4 to N6 qualifications are estimated to be at NQF Level 5 (the first year of higher education) but NATED N6 graduates are only able to gain access to entry-level university qualifications despite having more than the equivalent of a National Senior Certificate. Even completed occupational programmes, such as learnerships, and other skills programmes, do not qualify students for entrance to university. There is therefore minimal articulation (transfer) by students from TVET Colleges to public universities.

The options for students who have dropped out of the schooling system with less than Grade 9 are even more limited. CETCs offer a range of Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) programmes Levels 1-4 that culminate in an NQF Level 1 qualification (Grade 9). Students are however able to rewrite their National Senior Certificate through

some CETCs and a National Adult Senior Certificate for Adults (NASCA), which has four subjects at Grade 12 level that require a 50% pass rate. The NASCA is not currently recognised for entrance to university, however. Students who leave school early can spend years trying to achieve the equivalent of a National Senior Certificate.

### **ALMOST HALF OF STUDENTS WHO GET INTO TVET COLLEGES FAIL OR DROP OUT**

Students at TVET Colleges and CETCs are overwhelmingly black African and come from disadvantaged backgrounds. The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) funds the majority of students from TVET Colleges but does not fund CETC programmes. If students fail subjects during the TVET College study, they are required to pay for these subjects from personal funds, which is often an unsustainable option. Throughput rates for TVET Colleges, while improving, remain low with just over half of students able to complete TVET College programmes within the prescribed time limits.

A key focus for CETCs and TVET Colleges is to contribute to economic development in South Africa through producing graduates for the labour >>

market and/or sustainable self-employment. South African data on access to employment is limited but there have been a few studies that provide indications of career destinations (Cosser, 2003; SSACI, 2016; Papier and Rogan, 2019; DHET 2021, forthcoming). Most research has focused on labour market destinations for TVET College graduates.

The results of these studies show disappointing labour market employment outcomes. Barely more than half of graduates were employed or in paid, work-based learning programmes 18 months after graduation. The most recent study (forthcoming) has shown the graduate employment rate falling to under 50%. NATED N6 graduates in Engineering and Business showed higher employment rates than graduates with lower-level qualifications. Very few TVET College graduates were self-employed. Borhat et al. (2016) concluded that TVET College graduates were only as likely as secondary school leavers to gain employment. These authors further assert that the high unemployment rates in South Africa can be attributed, firstly, to an oversupplied labour market with low levels of education and training skills in an economy that seeks skilled occupations and, secondly, to the poor quality of prior education and training.

A key challenge for South Africa's education and training system is to address youth unemployment and to ensure that South Africa has skilled workers. The current system of provision within TVET Colleges is highly centralised with similar programmes offered at all 50 TVET Colleges regardless of whether they are located near industry or in rural areas. TVET Colleges have not been delegated authority or funding to run customised programmes that can respond to local or provincial needs. Whereas DHET is very aware of these issues and has put in place a Centres of Excellence project

involving 23 TVET Colleges to develop theoretical and practical programmes in conjunction with industry, the impact of this intervention is still to be demonstrated.

In analysing reasons for the lack of articulation by TVET College graduates into higher education and the economy, the following should be noted. Firstly, post-school education and training providers cannot take responsibility for the state of the economy and create employment opportunities. Between 1994 and 2012, the average economic growth rate was 3.2% (Bhorat, Cassim & Tseng, 2016). Since 2012, the annual growth rate fell from 2.2% to 1.3% in 2015. Sheppard (2017) notes that this level of economic growth falls far short of the National Development Plan estimates of more than 5% per annum to 2030 (National Planning Commission, 2011), and far below the 8 to 10% per annum needed for a period of two decades to address the "triple challenge" of unemployment, inequality and poverty in South Africa (Sheppard, 2017: 27).

Ball and Youdell (2007) point to the emergence of privatisation in education systems from the late 1980s and the early 1990s. They note that privatisation interventions focused on the introduction of "small state-free market" approaches to public services championed by political figures such as Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom (Ball & Youdell, 2007: 14).

The introduction of privatisation principles and approaches to state public systems is commonly referred to as "neoliberalism". The concept of public services being viewed as a small state alongside a free-market economy is now a dominant approach to public education globally. Ball and Youdell (2007: 16) note:

Privatisation tendencies are at the centre of the shift from education being seen as a public good that serves

the whole community, to education being seen as a private good that serves the interest of the educated individual, the employer and the economy.

Drawing on Ball and Youdell's (2007) arguments of endogenous and exogenous privatisation of education, it is argued that South Africa's neo-liberal economic approach has not enabled public or private education and training systems to produce TVET graduates who help to overcome critical skills shortages and contribute to national economic growth. These parallel policies have instead resulted in a separation of provision for initial and continuing vocational education and training, and have led to only minimal synergies between public and private providers that could otherwise be used to strengthen the country's education and training policies. Recent policy developments (DHET, 2013) have further limited the possibilities for public and private providers to collaborate and share expertise in what should be a coordinated TVET education and training intervention.

A second issue is that universities are broadly perceived by students as their first choice of study, whereas other post-school education and training options are more negatively perceived as second choice (and second chance) institutions. Given the rates of economic return for higher education studies, these perceptions are largely correct. Vocational education and training carries additional negative perceptions that stem from South Africa's colonial and apartheid past (Needham, 2020) as they reflect ways in which the majority of South Africans were excluded from education and training based on the systematised racism. Attitudes to vocational education and training have been largely negative within South Africa and the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

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Foster’s argument (1965) that “[A]spirations are determined largely by the individual’s perception of opportunities within the exchange sector of the economy, destinations by the *actual* structure of opportunities in that sector” (emphasis in the original 1965a, 151) appear to remain true today. Despite the provision of significant state funding for students to enter TVET Colleges as well as national policy targets set to produce artisans (National Development Plan, 2012), the overwhelming preference of students in South Africa is to access universities rather than TVET Colleges. DHET has recently commissioned research to ascertain reasons why students are not applying for NSFAS funding to study TVET College programmes (DHET, 2019). Attitudinal responses to articulation have revealed that the TVET College sector is not perceived as the primary choice of study by young people and that the TVET College sector is subjected to funding and quality assurance regimes that do not assist effective articulation within South Africa’s post-school education and training sector. TVET graduates cannot easily go on to university studies and their job prospects are poor – even if they graduate from TVET Colleges.

A key systemic issue affecting the



TVET College sector in South Africa is that TVET provision is situated at the nexus of three national sub-qualification frameworks that have operated largely in isolation from each other. TVET provision spans schooling, occupational and higher education qualification levels, but articulation with other education and training sectors has remained elusive. From a curriculum perspective that drew on Bernstein’s (1999) notions of horizontal and vertical discourses, attempts to create a professional qualifications pathway in financial planning qualifications that spans TVET Colleges and universities have met with limited success. The project starkly revealed the difficulties of combining, in a single articulation route, a unitised qualifications approach (as employed in the workplace-directed occupational programme) with the traditional disciplinary-based qualifications approach of universities. Research found, for example, that one occupational programme embarked upon at a TVET College which focused on the immediate short-term skill needs of the insurance industry did not lay the foundation needed by candidates who might wish to progress to higher qualifications at university

for the purposes of acquiring the higher professional designation. The project therefore indicated that future interventions aimed at articulating academic and occupational qualifications in South Africa will need to take account of the curriculum development, learner support and lecturer capacity-building required for integration of horizontal and vertical knowledge constructs, and how these manifest in institutional pedagogies and practices.

### **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

There are several policy implications arising from this research on articulation. The first is that TVET Colleges have very little autonomy to be responsive to local and provincial needs, despite this intention being announced in the DHET 2013 White Paper. TVET. Colleges remain centralised under DHET with common governance and curriculum offerings. Current initiatives such as the TVET Colleges Centres of Excellence offer a strong opportunity for TVET Colleges to partner with local companies to develop specialised artisan opportunities and autonomy for capable TVET Colleges should be explored. There are many pockets of >>

excellence within the TVET College sector that can be similarly investigated.

A second policy implication is that TVET provision remains largely focused at secondary school education levels, with the exception of the NATED courses. Given the overwhelming preference for students to enter university as a first choice, the TVET College sector remains as a second choice option due to the lack of opportunities to obtain higher education qualifications. Countries such as the UK and Australia, as well as Francophone African countries, have enabled their vocational systems to offer higher education qualifications and in some cases full undergraduate degrees. This could enable the development of cohesive professional pathways from artisanship to recognised professions.

A third policy implication is that if the purpose of TVET Colleges is to generate employment, most of the current TVET provision focuses on the formal economy and there is minimal focus on entrepreneurship and the informal economy. Vocational education and training in Brazil has led to a significant boost of informal economic activity development through assisting graduates with training and accredited workshops to establish small businesses. Some TVET Colleges in South Africa have had extensive experience of working within the informal economy and this expertise needs to be re-addressed from a policy perspective.

A final policy implication is that NSFAS funding and skills levy funding is only available to public TVET Colleges. In South Korea, funding is allocated to students, rather than institutions, who are then free to enter public or private institutions. While this may be impractical given South Africa's current fiscal position, synergies between public and private TVET providers, particularly in the area of continuous

professional development in the workplace, should be explored.

## CONCLUSION

This article has discussed some key findings on articulation within South Africa's post-school education and training sector. Articulation between CETCs, TVET Colleges and universities is weak and students spend many years of post-school study in their attempts to access universities. The primary focus of TVET Colleges is to provide education and training for employment but only half of the graduates are able to access formal employment. While education and training provision supply has a limited impact on the state of the economy, TVET Colleges also face structural constraints on their ability to provide programmes that are responsive to local and provincial needs. Articulation within South Africa's post-school education and training sector is complex and needs to take into account a range of approaches that can assist the development of a robust public and private vocational sector capable of contributing to South Africa's economic development. Key policy implications focus on TVET College autonomy to be more responsive to local industrial needs, increase the range of provision that includes higher education programmes, particularly professionally accredited programmes, provide education and training that includes the needs of both the formal and informal economy as well as encourage synergies between private and public institutions.

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