

TVET Colleges: a lifeline for youth at risk

By Seamus Needham

Seamus Needham's main article focuses on the challenges of the post-school education and training system in general terms, to highlight the history of policy weaknesses and the urgency of general reform. Here he looks at a specific case, where the potential of TVET colleges shines through.¹

Dropping out of school is a really bad idea – for most people. The figures show that those who drop out experience a much harder struggle to get onto a successful life path. Some of those most at risk of dropping out are those who keep failing and repeating grades – until they are years older than their classmates.

Since 2013 a provincial education department has funded approximately 2,000 young people who repeated a grade once or more times in their high school phase to transition into public TVET Colleges. This is referred to as the Youth Focus Project (YFP). This vignette focuses on some of these learners'

experience of their transition to TVET Colleges.

Youth at risk were asked what the key differences were between their skills training programmes at TVET Colleges and their previous experience of school. Many students said they felt overwhelmed with the volume of work at the school and most responded that the TVET skills training programmes were more focused, which allowed them to spend more time on each of the four mandatory subjects. Key differences in teaching styles are shown by the following excerpts from interviews with youth at risk:

In college they try to make us understand.

The college will teach you more about what you will become one day.

It was different because in school there [are] too many subjects and here in college they push you to do your work in time and ... don't shout at you.

Another learner noted that the staff at the TVET College she attended "treated us like eggs, holding us carefully". Learners showed increased confidence and a sense of maturity:

It made me more responsible, made me open-minded, and gave [me] a much clearer vision and idea [of] what I want to become and why. The college gave me hope of becoming something in life.

Experiences within the training programmes at TVET Colleges were generally reported as positive. Learner comments included: "At school we had a fear of maths" while at their TVET College "the lecturers are prepared to explain something until we understand – even if we ask a hundred times!"

Learners who did achieve employment through the YFP showed their appreciation and said that:

This programme has opened so many doors to the workplace and I am still working at [a well-known retailer] since last year and I got a chance from the College to work in such a great working environment.

I feel if I didn't do this course I wouldn't have gotten the job. I'm currently ... working in the sales department. I feel wholesale and retail has >>



helped me a lot because I use the knowledge I've gained in the Wholesale and Retail [programme] and apply it at work. It made me more aware that the wholesale and retail is a very great department to go into.

Over 57% of the entire cohort of youth graduates interviewed indicated that they would like to study further in future. Of the 43 graduates currently studying, most indicated that their primary reason for doing so was to obtain a higher qualification. Students generally furthered their studies in the occupational areas that they had been introduced to by the YFP.

The YFP can be analysed in different ways. From a human capital perspective, it could be argued that the youth at risk intervention was expensive, demonstrated poor economic returns on investment and therefore had limited impact. From a capability perspective,

however, the intervention allowed the learners' own voices to emerge, and they articulated outcomes of their exposure to the education and training intervention which went beyond an employment focus.

Despite facing failure at school and with limited career options, these young people regained their self-esteem and confidence, and found new hope for their future careers and learning pathways in spite of struggling to find employment immediately after the intervention. A key reason for the majority of learners entering this programme had been to obtain a qualification, which most achieved.

In the interviews with students and in the student survey, TVET College staff were acknowledged and their personal dedication to students was cited. In particular, staff members were thanked for their specific teaching styles which enabled students' opportunities to feel valued as young adults and to take responsibility for their own learning. Students also credited

TVET College staff with reaching out to their parents and family, which they did not experience in the large classes they had at schools.

Although the key policy aim of TVET Colleges is to create employability options for students, TVET Colleges have the potential to become a critical second chance institution and to create inclusive teaching and learning opportunities for vulnerable cohorts.

REFERENCE

Branson, N. 2018. 'An analysis of out of school youth who have not completed matric: what can available data tell us?' Cape Town: SALDRU, UCT. SALDRU Working Paper No. 232, available at http://www.opensaldru.uct.ac.za/bitstream/handle/11090/947/2018_232_Saldruwp.pdf?sequence=1

ENDNOTE

- 1 The interviews cited above were done for an evaluation in 2016. The YFP project continued, supported by funding from industry and SETAs, until 2020, when it was stopped due to budgetary constraints. **NA**