

Sub-theme 1: Enhancing Academic Excellence in FET Colleges

Developing a responsive Vocational Education Sector: The Role and Effectiveness of College-Industry Partnerships

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ABSTRACT

In vocational education and training (VET) the value of links between educational institutions and employers is sometimes taken-for-granted in a way that belies the complexity of bringing business and education into closer and direct partnership and the varied ways in which these arrangements are navigated. There are broadly two traditions in play¹, both with advocates and critics. On the one hand there is a strong argument that vocational education and training institutions can meet the employment needs of business and industry when there is close collaboration on a number of fronts. This approach suggests a synergy in their respective priorities. On the other hand, the recognition that education and industry are separate institutions with their own distinct priorities and fields of expertise sometimes leads to scepticism as to whether cross-institutional partnerships can have anything more than a superficial impact, with a lifespan limited to specific intervention. Within this context it is argued that these partnerships may take up a great deal of collective energy but lack sustainability and continuity over the long term.

These debates frequently centre on the perceived role of the Further Education and Training (FET) Colleges and the nature of the programmes that they should offer. In South Africa, the advent of the National Certificate Vocational (NCV) and the recapitalisation process has had a profound impact on the FET College landscape and has been the subject of extensive discussion. More specifically these discussions explore the role of the NCV and how this programme is located within the continuum of other programme types and the way in which these different programmes are intended to meet the needs of different target groups.

This report aims to contribute to the above debates by providing an analysis of the lessons learned from a series of college-industry partnership (CIP) evaluations commissioned by the National Business Institute (NBI). The NBI has actively worked with a variety of partners, over a number of years, to support the growth of a FET College sector that is able to offer programmes that support the development of the “knowledge, skills, attitudes and values South Africans require as individuals and citizens, as lifelong learners and as economically productive members of society²” so as to contribute to “addressing the related challenges of skills, growth and reducing unemployment³”

¹ Brown, A. and Keep, E. 1999. *Review of vocational education and training research in the United Kingdom*. Brussels: European Commission.

² Education White Paper 4, A programme for the transformation of Further Education and Training, 25 September, 1998

³ CIP Concept document, NBI, September 2003

Background and Introduction

Globally, the world is facing a skills challenge in the area of technical skills, including engineers, technologists, technicians and artisans. This challenge also presents itself in South Africa, a developing economy that requires such skills for sustained economic growth as envisaged by both government and business sectors across the board. Inasmuch as such growth is required for economic maturity, it is also the underpinning factor for sustainable social development.

As quoted in the recent JIPSA Annual Report,

*“the skills problem in our country remains massive...The vacancies in the public sector are still at unacceptably high levels; public schools and university throughputs are still too low; the quality and availability of trainers is a major constraint; and rural communities have inadequate access to education and skills opportunities. These are among other significant national skills challenges.”*⁴

The development goal of the work in FET is accelerated and expanded skills delivery, and an improvement in the quality of skills. The development of a modern, high quality, responsive public FET colleges system in South African can be achieved as a result of close cooperation between business and government as well as companies and FET colleges.

FET colleges form a natural link in the skills development chain given the colleges’ revised structure, the recapitalization process that has taken place, as well as a recent curriculum overhaul. Specifically the introduction of the NCV will ensure that there is a steady supply of new entrants into the labour market who have a strong generic vocational base, are able to readily acquire the competencies associated with artisan performance and are equipped with the necessary foundational knowledge to adapt to changing forms of work and technology.

Further, recent policy shifts have seen the Departments of Labour and Education agree that learners that complete their NCV and then undertake relevant work experience, as well as where required additional specified learning activities, should be able to undertake the related national recognized trade tests⁵. These trade tests have recently been revised by working groups consisting of different industry players and it is anticipated that these tests will now more adequately align with the needs and requirements of industry as well as other role players.

It is suggested that in order to realize the above mentioned benefits there is a need for the NCV curriculum to be modern, of a high quality, and responsive. It is further argued that to achieve this there must be close cooperation between business and government as well as sectors, companies and FET colleges.

The purpose of the NBI’s work in FET is to play a catalytic intermediary role, broker policy dialogue and facilitate an engagement between business and government within the FET/ Vocational Skills development arena. The intention is to generate new insights and knowledge about the alignment between education and training and the needs of society and the economy.

⁴ JIPSA Annual Report 2007

⁵ Note that there is a need to determine how the immediate need for learners will be addressed in the absence of the N2 graduates and the lag before there will be NCV graduates

Developing a College Industry Partnership Strategy

The NBI involvement began with the development of the Green Paper on FET through to the Colleges Collaboration Fund (CCF) - which ran from July 1999 to June 2004 - and then evolved into the College Industry Partnership (CIP) programme. Specifically, the intent of the CIP was to encourage private sector contribution to the development of intermediate skills across the range of economic sectors and occupations. The CIP made a case for the role that FET colleges could play in supporting provision towards these intermediate level skills to enable learners to attain occupational qualifications i.e. the development of an intermediate skills pipeline. This imperative was captured within the goal of the CIP, which is to support the development of:

‘A modern, high quality responsive public FET system contributing significantly to accelerated and expanded skills development and delivery, and improved quality of skills in SA.’

The NBI, together with its business members, and stakeholders from colleges and the Department of Education (DoE), explored what would need to be done to ensure that this goal was addressed. A ten-point business plan was developed, which focused on:

1. College governance
2. Strategic planning
3. College management development
4. College staff development
5. Programmes and curriculum Development
6. Quality assurance:
7. Work-based learning for college and 18.2 (unemployed) learners
8. Career counselling and job placement for College learners
9. Industry-standard training facilities and other resources
10. Strategic dialogue, information dissemination and policy engagement

The NBI has facilitated partnerships in the Construction, Mining, Steel and Engineering sectors. The rationale for the partnerships has been based on fact that these engagements were borne out of necessity. Given the current and expected growth across the engineering sectors, industry needs many more educated and skilled staff and it was felt that public FET colleges could and should contribute on a far greater scale to addressing the skills challenge.

This view is supported by research undertaken into the relevance of the NATED programmes and the related role of FET Colleges. The research reflected the following key aspects:

- Strong endorsement for the importance of FET colleges as essential training providers in South Africa;

- The real need for improving the relevance and quality of existing programmes (Nated);
- The view that delivery modes and mechanisms are not responsive to the needs of industry; and
- The need for improved educator knowledge and understanding of industry.⁶

Engagement across a number of varied stakeholder sectors indicated that there was a view that a relevant NCV programme had the potential to address such industry needs as well as also satisfying the state's need for a sound vocational educational system that could address the various social issues that exist in the country including youth unemployment, low levels of post-school qualifications and poverty amongst others.

Key challenges:

- The CIPs highlight that the process of identifying the relevant partners is a challenge and specifically that the partners encountered difficulties in ensuring that the appropriate individuals from education are involved and in determining who in industry to engage with.
- The partners have different imperatives. While the industry focus is on immediate skills priorities the Department of Education's emphasis is on longer-term programmes that have a strong general vocational thrust. This emerged as both a tension in terms of the curriculum development process and in terms of the expectations that partners have for the partnership.
- While the Department of Education has determined that the focus of the FET Colleges is on the pre-employed, industry partners highlight the need for programmes that meet the needs of employees as well as individuals that have been outside of the education and work environments and require more occupationally directed programmes.
- There is also an inherent challenge with regards to the need for the Department of Education to engage industry players in a process – which can be lengthy - whilst at the same time ensuring that they expedite implementation in terms of a process that has been mandated by political authorities.
- The CIPs reflect the myriad of complexities associated with managing systemic and institutional change and ensuring that the requisite resources are in place to support these changes. This includes the need to address a range of practices including selection of learners, the infrastructure to support learning and the management of workplace learning.
- While the partners prioritised staff development, partners indicated that in the course of implementation, staff exhibited a reluctance to attend these development programmes outside of formal college hours.
- The partnerships also emphasise the challenges associated with establishing articulation arrangements between programmes and of determining progression pathways.

⁶ A Survey on the uptake on the N-programmes by the Mining and Minerals Sector, NBI, 2005

- Finally, there are challenges associated with sustaining the partnerships; the impact of the resource arrangements can be seen in the Steel and Mining case studies. Challenges associated with ensuring that the partners remain active and consistent in the partnership is highlighted in all three of the CIPs.

The NBI has played a key role in facilitating these partnership, and for ensuring the implementation of agreed upon activities. Central to this role has been the imperative of ensuring that challenges are addressed as they emerge. This has not been unproblematic and the need to navigate the role of facilitator versus that of supporting industry has also carried with it certain challenges, which are perhaps inherent to such a process. The need to ensure that this support role is carried through to local levels is one that also emerged in all CIP engagements.

Lessons Learnt

Structuring the partnership

1. In order to maximise their potential for **systemic impact** it is important for partnerships to have institutional linkages and dialogue at the highest level possible (i.e. senior individuals within national government as well as industry leaders at national before proceeding to local levels of college-company interaction. This recognizes that partnerships work best where business has senior leadership that can play an advocacy role and talk on behalf of the industry with authority. Critical to this is an understanding of national imperatives and the long term benefits of sustainable development. Further, this should be structured in a manner that takes cognisance of the reality that it may not be possible for the Department of Education to participate in all sector-based structures and that there may be a need to consider a structure that cuts across the sector partnerships and includes senior business and education leadership. This will address the cross cutting issues that need to be addressed to enable the local partnerships to succeed.
2. It is also important that the provincial sphere should receive greater prominence and that there are structures in place at this level which can support the partnership in a myriad of ways. Examples include reaching an understanding about the norms and standards for educators or determining how resources such as the recap monies will be utilised.
3. Experience indicates that partnerships benefit from a **'package' approach** at a both a systemic level as well as at the local level whereby agreed upon selection criteria and processes + shared curriculum and assessment development + work experience provision + plus bursary support + lecturer development are considered as components of a single initiative, rather than as discreet and relatively uncoordinated activities.
4. Working on the basis of shared experiences and lessons learnt contribute to the development of a best practice model that allows for engagement to be enhanced and maximum impact to be generated.

Considering the 'rules of engagement'

5. Partnerships need to be premised on the understanding that partners recognise their mutual need and the respective contribution that each partner can make. It is critical within this context that the partnerships actively focus on addressing each of the partners' respective priorities.
6. Cross-institutional collaboration (i.e. between industry and education) needs to be underpinned by **respect for the specialist areas of expertise** associated with each institutional domain as well as for the constraints faced by each institution. The case studies suggest that there is an increased possibility of the partnerships succeeding where individuals that are appointed to support the respective interventions can traverse college and industry expertise.
7. Related to the above, there is a need to understand the different institutional decision making arrangements (between college and corporate) which needs to take into account the varied institutional practices

Building the credibility of the programme

8. **Assessment** is seen as critical for the credibility of the NCV. At college level integrated assessment is crucial for ensuring that learners who successfully complete these programmes have a qualification that is recognised by industry and providers as a clear milestone towards becoming an artisan. This collaboration should then be echoed in the process of determining the trade test which is seen as the crucial common denominator between the four routes to artisan qualification.

Managing the Partnership

9. The gap between **strategic and operational partnership levels** should not be underestimated. In this regard it is important that a third party facilitates ongoing vertical and horizontal partnership relations, cross-sectoral sharing of partnership processes, successes and challenges, as well as continuous reflection can play a critical role.
10. **Formative as well as summative evaluation** of partnerships goals and activities should be undertaken. This is seen to be a critical component of enhancing the quality of both process and outcome. This should take into account the different levels and spheres at which a partnership operates.

11. The **resources** available (from both industry and education partners) to a partnership have a crucial impact on its ability to move ‘from talk to action’ i.e. a champion/s that drives the initiative and ensure consistent momentum and buy-in.

Further, resources demonstrate commitment of the partners and the process of determining where these resources will be sourced is seen as critical to ‘testing’ the extent that partners are clear about their rationale for being in the partnership.

Conclusion

The CIP strategy highlights the potential to both consolidate the work that is being implemented within the specific colleges in the partnerships with the opportunity to expand this process in other colleges across the FET sector. This is particularly relevant given the interest various sectors have shown towards participating in strengthening the curricula. Once the colleges involved in the partnerships have achieved the requisite standard then this could serve as a benchmark of what has been described as “a quality standard” with regards to the provision of the NCV programmes.

While these lessons show the complexity of partnership processes they also signal an untapped potential that bodes well for the future. In a context in which there is a growing demand for intermediate-level knowledge and skills there is a pressing need to consider how most effectively to support meaningful relationships between colleges and industries.

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