

Chapter THREE

Skills and Education



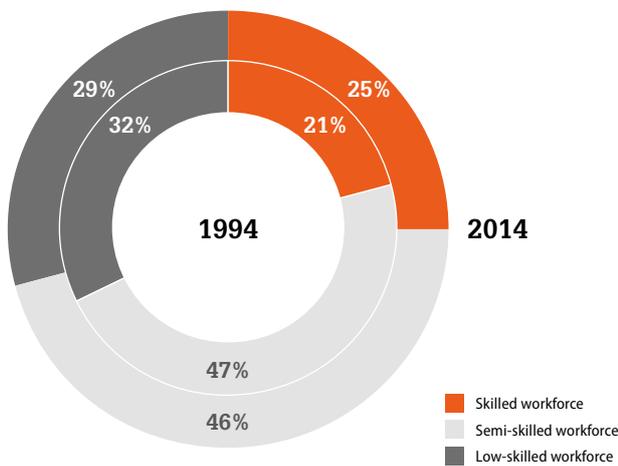
Skills and Education at a Glance

The percentage of children attending early childhood development facilities increased significantly between 2002 and 2012. In the same vein, more children benefitted from the government's no-fee schools programme. In 2013, 62.4 per cent of children over the age of 5 years did not pay school fees. According to the Department of Basic Education's preliminary data, in 2014 there were 31 learners per teacher in public ordinary schools (excluding independent schools) compared to a ratio of 34:1 in 2004. Since 2010, the ratio has remained constant at 30:1.

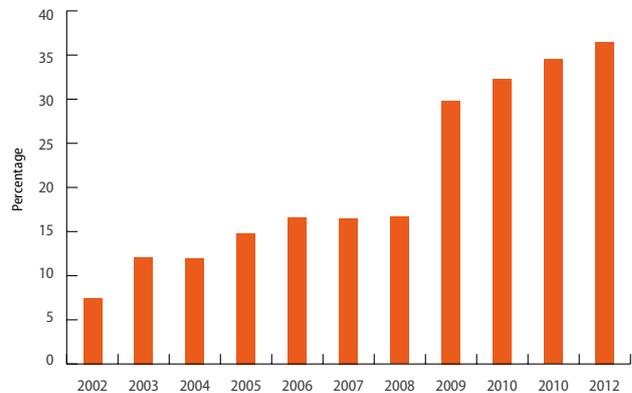
Matric remains a key milestone for school-to-work transition, and the National Senior Certificate pass rate improved from 73.3 per cent in 2003 to 78.2 per cent in 2013. However, there are variations across provinces, with rural provinces showing weaker performances than urban areas like Gauteng and the Western Cape. The aggregate also does not account for dropout rates among the matric cohort.

Student participation rates for the coloured and Indian populations between the ages of 18 and 29 years decreased between 2002 and 2013 but, generally, the white and Indian populations in this age group had higher student participation rates than their black African and coloured counterparts. Men were more likely to attain Masters and Doctoral qualifications than women, and were more likely to qualify in the fields of science, engineering and technology.

South Africa's vital skills statistics

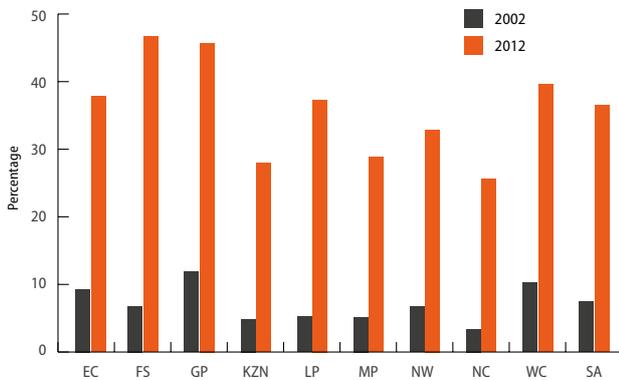


Percentage of children aged 0-4 attending ECD facilities, 2002-2012



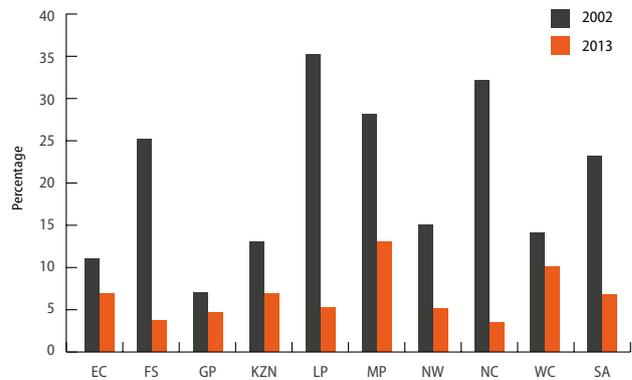
Source: Department of Basic Education, Education For All (EFA) 2013 Country Progress Report South Africa

Percentage of children aged 0-4 years attending ECD facility by Province, 2002 and 2012



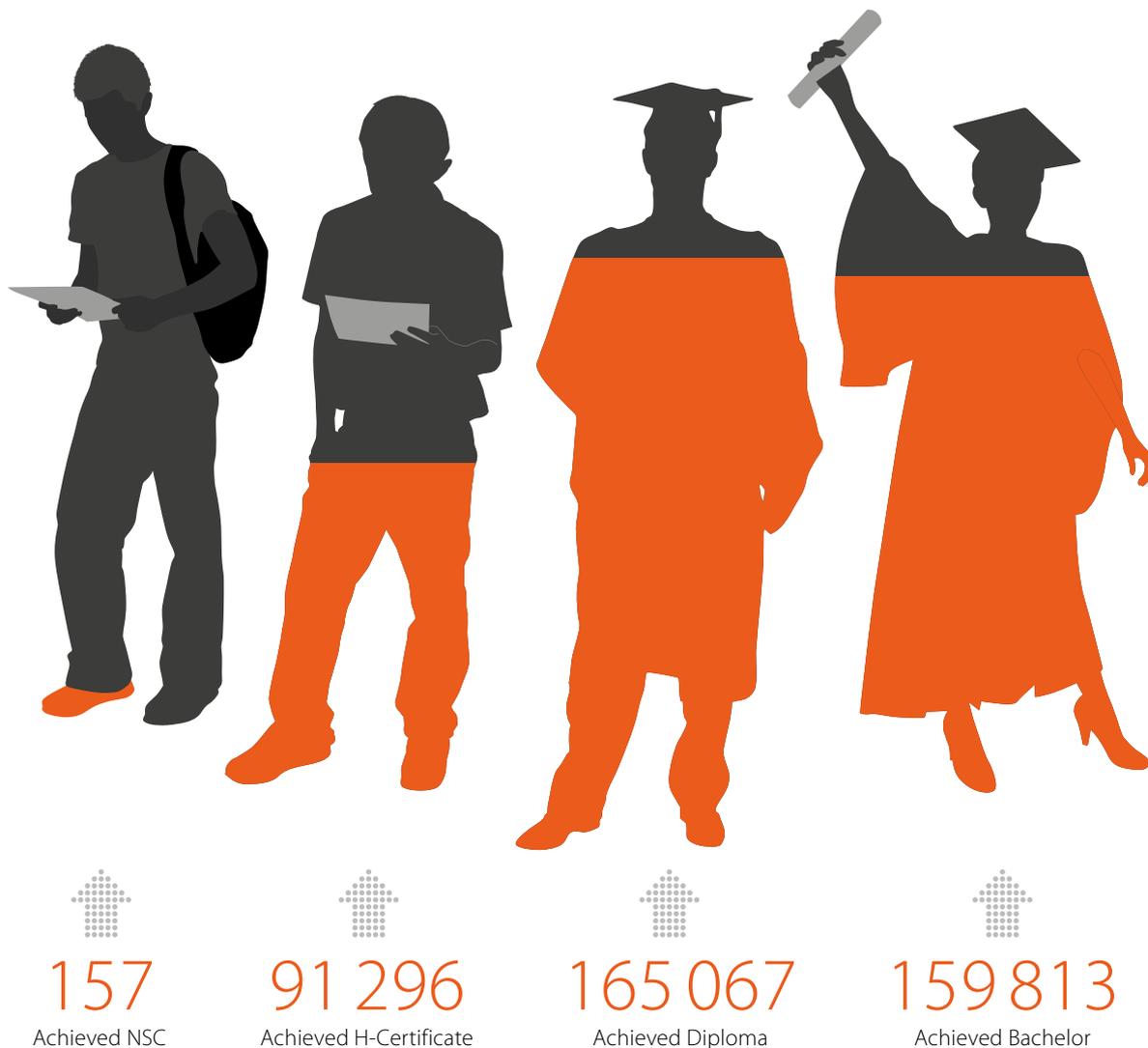
Source: Department of Basic Education, Education For All (EFA) 2013 Country Progress Report South Africa

Percentage of households that experienced a lack of books at school as a problem by province, 2002 and 2013



Source: 2002 data from the Department of Basic Education, Education for All (EFA) 2013 Country Progress Report; 2013 from the General Household Survey (2013)

School performance: National Senior Certificate passes by type of qualification, 2013

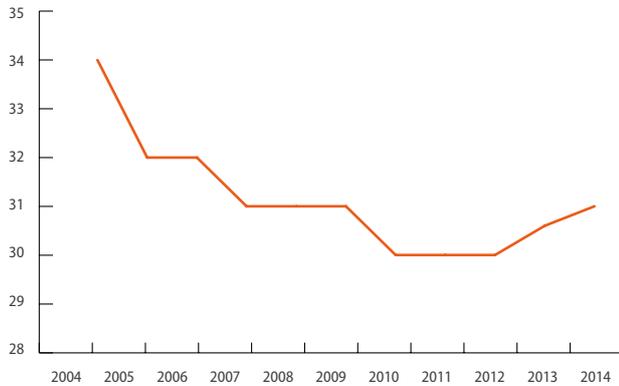


	Quintile 1	Quintile 2	Quintile 3	Quintile 4	Quintile 5	Totals
Achieved Bachelor	21 068	26 931	30 408	26 225	55 181	159 813
Achieved Diploma	30 734	35 893	37 758	28 386	32 296	165 067
Achieved H-Cert	22 653	24 605	23 132	12 489	8 417	91 296
Achieved NSC	82	53	14	7	1	157
Total achieved	74 537	87 482	91 312	67 107	95 895	416 333

Source: Department of Basic Education, 2013 National Senior Certificate Technical Report
 Data notes: excludes schools that are not classified into quintiles

* All public ordinary schools in South Africa are categorised into five groups, called quintiles, for purposes for allocating financial resources. Quintile 1 representing the poorest quintile, while quintile 5 is the 'least poor'. The rankings are done according to the poverty of the community around the school, as well as, certain infrastructure factors. Schools in quintile 1, 2 and 3 have been declared no-fee schools, while schools in quintiles 4 and 5 are fee-paying schools. (Source : Western Cape Education Department [WCED] online)

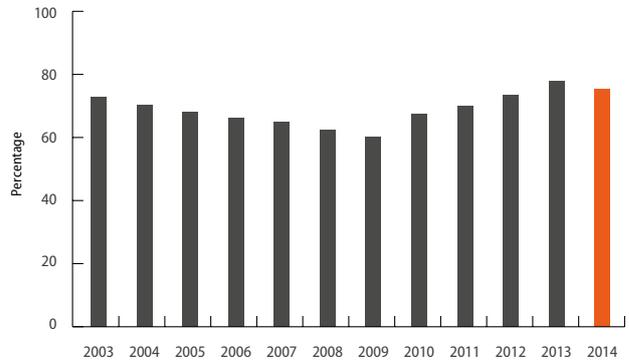
Learner-educator ratio, 2004–2014



Source: Data for 2004–2012 from The Presidency (Department of Performance Monitoring and Evaluation), 2012 Development Indicators; data for 2013 and 2014 sourced from the Department of Education (2013 School Realities Report, and 2014 School Realities Report) – the figures are preliminary, and the final figures will be published by DBE in the more comprehensive Education Statistics in South Africa 2013 (expected release date 31 December 2014) and for 2014 data final figures expected to be released 31 December 2015

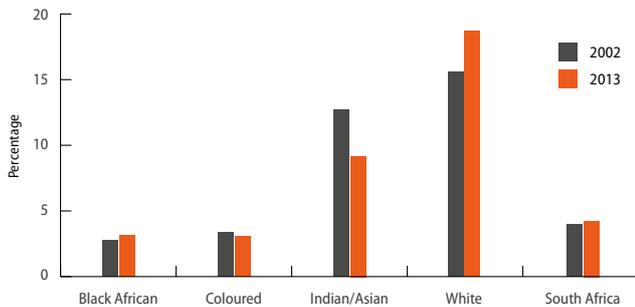
Data note: The learner-educator ratio is the average number of learners per teacher in a given school year based on headcounts for both learners and teachers in public ordinary schools and independent schools that are subsidised by the Department of Basic Education for 2013–2014 for state-paid and SGB-paid educators

National Senior Certificate examinations pass rate, 2003–2014



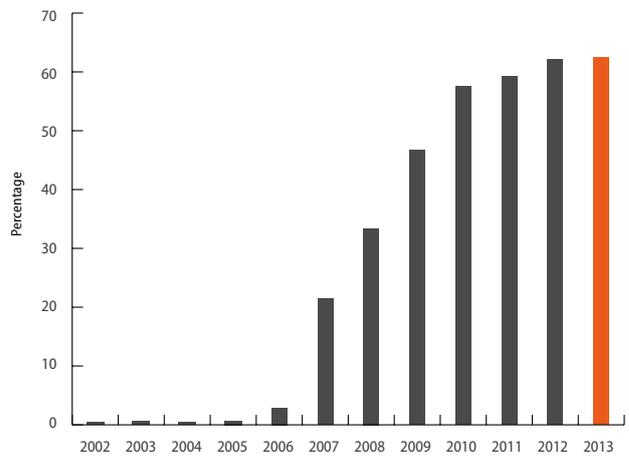
Source: 2003–2012 data from The Presidency (Department of Monitoring and Evaluation), 2012 Development Indicators; 2013 data sourced from Department of Basic Education (2013 NSC Examination Technical Report); 2014 data sourced from Department of Basic Education (National Senior Certificate: Information Booklet)

Percentage distribution of student participation rates for individuals aged 18–29 years by population groups, 2002 and 2013



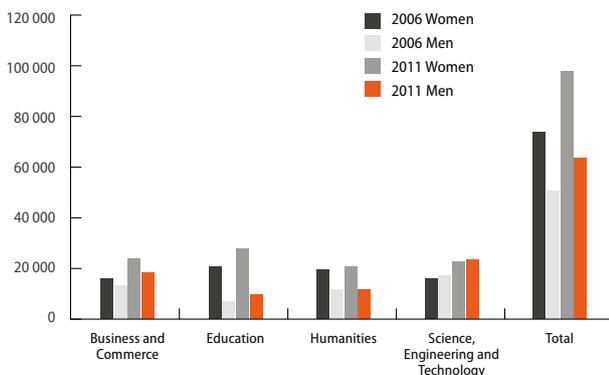
Source: Stats SA, 2013 General Household Survey

Percentage of those aged 5 years and older who attended schools and who do not pay tuition fees, 2002–2013



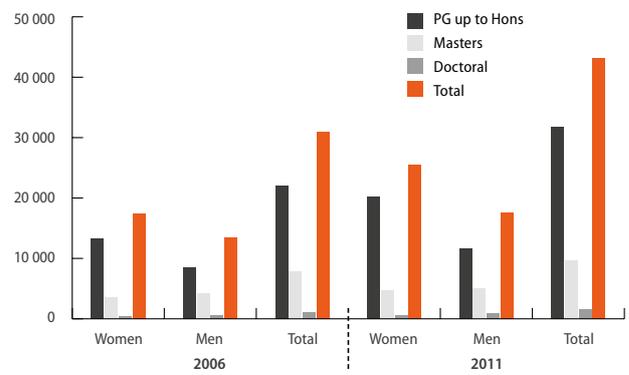
Source: Stats SA, 2013 General Household Survey

Headcount of graduates by field of study and gender 2006–2011

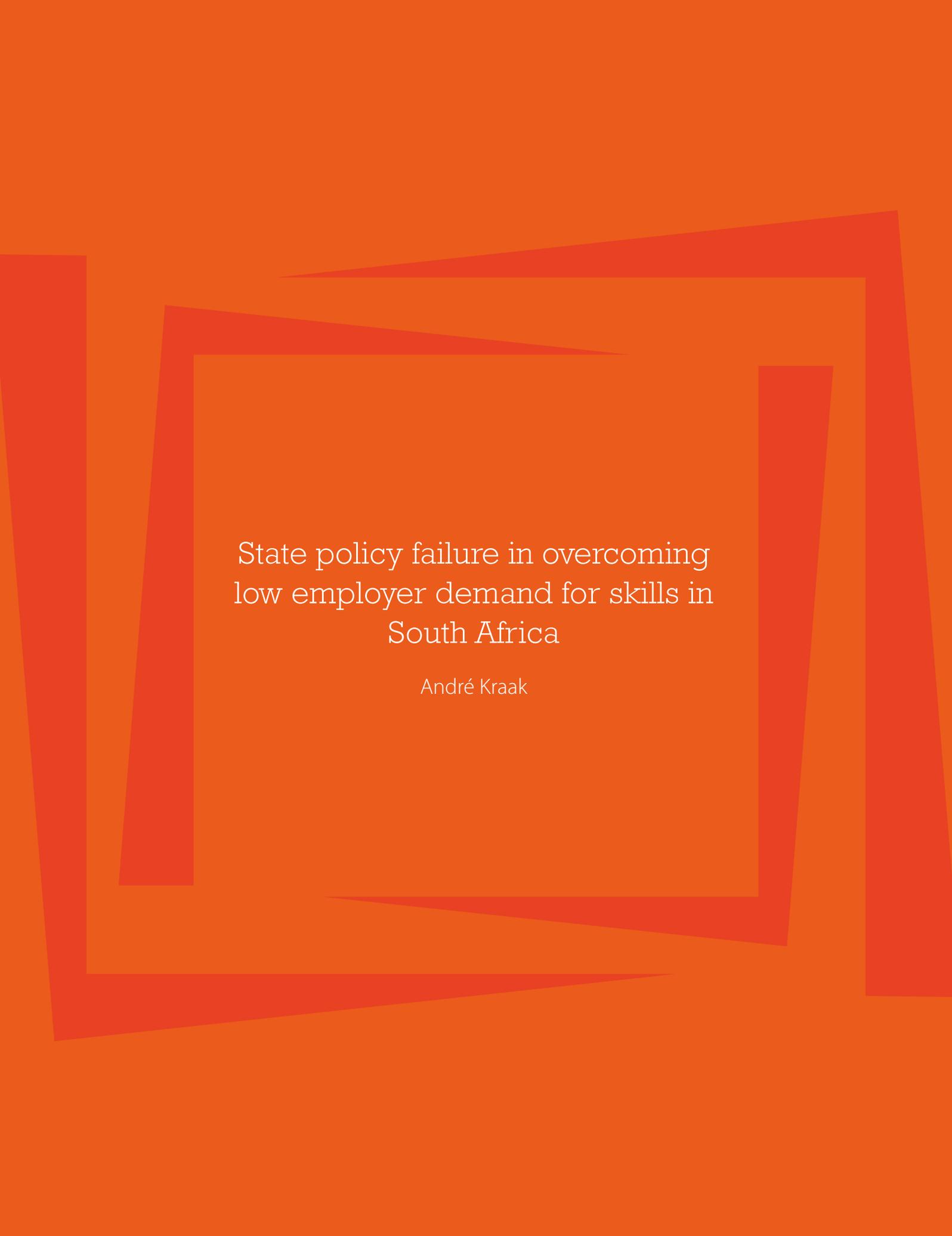


Source: Department of Higher Education and Training, Vital Stats 2011 Public Higher Education

Headcount of postgraduate qualifications awarded by gender, 2006 and 2011



Source: Department of Higher Education and Training, Vital Stats 2011 Public Higher Education



State policy failure in overcoming
low employer demand for skills in
South Africa

André Kraak

Introduction

This article examines state policy reform in the further education and training (FET) college sector in South Africa over the past decade. Getting the colleges better aligned to the government's economic and industrial policy initiatives is a major priority. They exist to provide the critical 'intermediate'-level skills needed in the economy – ideally comprising well-trained young people with vocationally oriented qualifications that are in demand in the economy. However, the reforms, which were intended to make college curricula more responsive to employer needs, have achieved the opposite effect: employer disillusionment. The analysis argues that the reforms have resulted in a supply-led system of vocational education and training (VET) provision in South Africa, as has occurred in other Anglo-Saxon countries. More specifically, the FET college sector reforms are centrally imposed and statist, involving little consultation with employers. The results have been disastrous. College throughput rates have plummeted and a high percentage of college graduates face unemployment. The extent of employer alienation and poor college outcomes do not provide an adequate platform for the 'ramping-up' of vocational and career-oriented skills needed for the government to reach its medium- to long-term economic goals.

Anglo-Saxon traditions

Historically, the skills regimes of most Anglo-Saxon countries – the UK, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia and Canada – have come to share similar institutional features, including those of the education and training system. For example, the FET colleges in each of these countries reflect very similar characteristics. The countries also share many of the same institutional weaknesses.

Convergence of policy reforms intensified in the 1980s and 1990s, with the spread of neo-liberal public sector reforms across the globe. Many of the reforms initially introduced in the UK were borrowed and copied across the Anglo-Saxon world. In South Africa, this included the introduction of sector skills councils (SSCs), a national qualifications framework (NQF), competitive and marketised funding arrangements, 'New Public Management' methods of performance appraisal and target setting, and, importantly for this article, a new set of national vocational qualifications (NVQs) in the FET college sector.

The main area of policy convergence – and policy weakness – has been the adoption of 'supply-side' interventions in the VET system (for example, increasing the number of people acquiring an NVQ each year). However, this approach has received considerable criticism recently – especially in the UK and South Africa – because the vast investments in building the supply-side architecture (including the SSCs, the NQF and a plethora of NVQs) have not produced an equivalent outcome with respect to increased numbers of skilled people. Nor are

countries such as the UK and South Africa more productive and competitive after nearly two decades of supply-side restructuring. The supply-side model is not working.

Part of the problem with this approach has been its association with a particular interpretation of the meaning of the 'knowledge-based economy' (KBE) – what Norton Grubb (2006) has called the 'educational gospel' – an ideological framework that has shaped education and training policies the world over. This 'gospel' proclaimed that the KBE 'would usher in an era of unbridled creativity where a workforce of knowledge workers, who would command "authorship" over their own work routines and activities, would be created' (Keep & James 2012: 211). In order to compete in a globalised world, governments needed to invest heavily in human capital as the main contributor to increased productivity and competitiveness. Unfortunately, argue Keep and James (2012), the notion that dull, routine, lower-paid employment would be swept away by a tide of knowledge work proved not to be the case. Twenty per cent of the British workforce are still in low-skill, low-paid precarious work.

Keep and James (2012) view this policy orientation as a mis-diagnosis of the KBE. They identify a range of problems affecting the British labour market and economy, including:

- » narrow VET qualifications with limited underpinning academic content, especially in literacy and numeracy;
- » low returns to VET qualifications, and limited opportunities for progression from NVQs back into further and higher education;
- » an underlying lack of demand for higher skills from employers; and
- » a principled and ideological opposition to any form of 'hard' or 'soft' industrial policy aimed at steering firms toward higher value-added production.

Each of the problems listed above is individually a serious cause for concern, but acting together as a mutually reinforcing matrix of forces, they produce pressures on employers to not raise their demand for higher skills. They also contribute to individuals perceiving the incentives to learn in relation to employment as weak and not worth the effort (Keep & James 2012). The solution proposed by governments such as those in the UK and South Africa – of increasing the supply of skilled and semi-skilled labour – is an inappropriate strategy, given low employer demand for increased skills.

An alternative approach

The critique of supply-side dominance of education and training policy in the Anglo-Saxon world, but also within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) community globally, has grown exponentially over the past decade. There is now an emerging consensus from a number of disciplinary fields that demand-side interventions

are necessary and that they are achieved most effectively by the integration of 'economic development' and 'workforce development' strategies in regional and local labour market settings. Three of these contributions are summarised below: the work of the 'Oxford/SKOPE' school; the work of the OECD on upgrading skills; and research on the community college system in the USA.

Low employer demand for skills

A group of 'education and economy' researchers based at Oxford University (Keep & Mayhew 1999, 2010; Keep & James 2012) have played a prominent role in highlighting the flaws of the supply-side route in the UK. In doing so, they have worked closely with the Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance (SKOPE) research network based at Oxford and Cardiff universities (Ashton, Sung & Turbin 2000; Sung, Ashton & Raddon 2009; Payne 2007; Payne & Keep 2011). These writers have all been prominent critics of the supply-side approach since the 1990s.

The Oxford/SKOPE school argues, firstly, that it is the product market or competitive strategy of a firm that determines a firm's demand for skill – and certainly not national government skills policy. Secondly, the way in which this competitive strategy shapes the utilisation of skills on the factory floor is seen to be a result of the choices made by firms in using the skills of their employees (Sung et al. 2009). There are two important factors that reflect employer choice: the technologies used by employers; and the management of production systems and the high performance working practices they adopt (Sung et al. 2009). Improvements in skills are not sufficient on their own to move a company's product market strategy up the value chain. This requires investment in capital equipment, product development and managerial innovation (Sung et al. 2009).

Re-shaping employer demand

The OECD has also made a significant contribution to this debate. The OECD work on skills development is led, surprisingly, by its Local Employment and Economic Development (LEED) research directorate and not by its Education research division. LEED has published a number of monographs over the past decade on partnerships, decentralisation and skills upgrading. Skills development is increasingly being viewed as a key component of local strategies aimed at creating new jobs through the facilitation of firm restructuring to increase productivity, as well as through the creation of new jobs in the 'green' economy (OECD 2013).

This more proactive role will not be accomplished through the traditional passive labour market policy of matching jobseekers with vacancies, training the unemployed and subsidising employment for the most disadvantaged workers. The OECD argues that this approach should be superseded by a more active labour market intervention, where employment and training agencies become major economic players

There is now an emerging consensus that demand-side interventions are necessary and that they are achieved most effectively by the integration of 'economic development' and 'workforce development' strategies in regional and local labour market settings.

in local and regional settings through interacting with firms to build their competitiveness.

What the OECD is suggesting is that skills upgrading lies at the core of what drives local economies. In many industries, 'learning by doing' within the firm and collectivities of firms is the best way to develop skills. This requires a localised development focus (Martinez-Fernandez & Choi 2012).

Partnerships are a core component of the OECD focus. Local partnerships typically involve businesses, NGOs, VET institutions and local and regional government. Partnerships create more opportunities for local innovation, and utilise the skills and tacit knowledge of specific communities, often in 'cluster' industrial strategies and other forms of 'agglomeration' economies. The key priority in this environment is the continuous upgrading of skills as product market and production processes change (Martinez-Fernandez & Choi 2012).

This alternative insight into the skills needs of employers throws up a set of intervention practices entirely different to those commonly associated with supply-side VET. It requires localised and regional interventions at firm level to support what Delbridge et al. (2006) call firm-level 'adaptive learning' – strategies to improve value-added and competitiveness through changes in the organisation of work and deployment of skills. This requires a broader concept of 'business support' to improve competitiveness and not merely skills.

This analysis is congruent with the Oxford/SKOPE approach. It argues that policy-makers in the field of workforce development should play a major role in joined-up strategies to help 'shape' employer demand for skills, steering the local economy towards higher value-added production (Froy, Giguère & Meghnagi 2012).

Breaking down silos

The task of integrating the work of local and regional economic development agencies with that of skills development agencies is not a simple or straightforward task. Much of what the OECD is arguing currently is shaped heavily by the experience of economic and workforce development agencies

in the USA – which now work together. This was not always the case – previously these agencies 'worked in silos and there was not much collaboration' (Hamilton 2012: 8). There is a strong history of silo management dividing these two important policy portfolios into separate worlds. Generally, in most countries across the globe, policies to support skills and economic development are delivered by separate government departments and ministries. Policy officials from these differing administrations pursue different strategies, which involve different actors, and the outcomes often contradict one another. For example, employment and skills are often managed from a labour supply perspective, while economic development is run from the demand point of view. The impact of such fragmentation on implementation is severe. Intended outcomes are often not achieved, while unintended and unforeseen discrepancies emerge, making the policy terrain more complicated and messy (Giguère 2008).

Such divisions are often taken for granted and blamed on historical working relationships and organisational cultures. However, the OECD argues that such silos can be reduced by injecting greater flexibility into the management of policies, and through the implementation of effective local governance arrangements (OECD 2011).

The role of the college sector

The community college sector in the USA is cited by the OECD as playing an important role in demand-side upskilling – a role executed in partnership with employers, state-level government departments and NGOs. The American experience is an unlikely inspiration for skills development, given that the USA has no formal VET policy or vocational institutions, other than the community college system itself. However, it is the 'policy integration' of economic and workforce development initiatives in the USA over the past two decades that has been significant, and is a source of inspiration for much of the OECD's emphasis on building skills strategies at the local and regional level. This focus on 'integration' emerged with the passing of the federal-level Workforce Investment Act (WIA) in 1998. The WIA requires each state governor to submit a strategic workforce plan to the federal department of labour outlining a five-year strategy for its workforce development system. Once a state-level workforce plan is approved, funding is devolved to local workforce investment boards (LWIBs) against their own five-yearly plans.

Today, there are over 600 LWIBs and 3 000 one-stop-shops, which provide a range of employment and training services. They operate in decentralised settings. Many states have used the WIA and its funds to forge partnerships across state-level agencies responsible for economic development and educational operations (Giguère 2008). The community colleges play a critical role in these partnerships. They have what Lakes (2012: 13) terms 'enviable locational assets', because of their regional distribution in the states and their

ability to provide job training and placements for cluster firms. Also, many workforce development strategies are designed to serve hard-to-reach populations at the lower end of the wage scale. The colleges have a regional and local infrastructure that can reach these at-risk communities.

LWIBs do not train. Their purpose is purely to develop positive working relationships and partnerships with the business community and to coordinate and facilitate the provision of employment and training services. The LWIBs must understand the workforce needs of businesses and provide services that meet their needs. This can be done by providing labour market information, conducting outreach, integrating employer needs into training strategies, brokering relationships with job opportunities, making services easy to access, and co-ordinating with partners to reduce duplication. In addition to this co-ordination role, each of the 600 LWIBs is required to contract with local organisations to provide services. The LWIBs typically use community colleges, secondary schools and private companies to provide training (OECD 2013).

Since the passing of the WIA in 1998, community colleges have been aggressive and entrepreneurial in working with firms to provide customised training for incumbent workers and new entrants. Many colleges have created separate administrative divisions that offer non-credit courses to adults seeking to improve their skills. In addition, these units engage in a wide range of entrepreneurial activities, such as business support and product improvement (OECD 2010).

The American system has a dual role: to train the existing workforce of adult workers, who in most cases acquire non-credit-bearing customised training; and, secondly, to train young school-leavers, most of whom are on two-year associate degree programmes with the hope of transferring to four-year degree programmes offered by the university system. The downside of the system is an extremely poor success rate – with only 21.9 per cent of students graduating in 150 per cent of the expected time. Causes of such poor performance include weak reading and maths skills, as well as studying part-time and being distracted by work and family demands. Teaching staff are mostly part-time, with high student-to-counsellor ratios adding to the weaknesses in the system (Osterman 2010).

The South African college sector

The South African college sector played a central role, historically, in training white workers for artisanal labour in the racially segregated apartheid economy throughout most of the 20th Century. Originally started as technical institutes to service the mines and manufacturing plants that emerged around Johannesburg in the early 1900s, these institutions grew in number and size and became known as technical colleges after 1923 (Kraak & Perold 2003). By 1994, the year in which democracy was established in South Africa, there



Colleges formerly restricted to white learners were located in the big cities closer to industry, whereas colleges designated for Africans were located in the former 'homelands' and far from sites of employment.

were 152 such colleges spread across the country. However, a number of problems faced the new democratic government when it came into office. Colleges formerly restricted to white learners were located in the big cities closer to industry, whereas colleges designated for Africans were located in the former 'homelands' and far from sites of employment. The deracialisation of these colleges was the first priority and occurred relatively quickly. In 1991, 76 435 students were enrolled in technical colleges – two-thirds of these were white. By 2000, the sector had a headcount of 350 465 students, and this growth was largely due to a 75 per cent increase in African enrolments (Kraak & Perold 2003).

A second problem was that of a very outdated curriculum, which employers did not support. The apprenticeship system, which had so effectively supported white learners throughout the 20th Century, was now in severe decline, as was the case in other Anglo-Saxon countries during this time. Curriculum reform was needed urgently. However, the government began to attend to this only in 2007, because of other more pressing institutional changes and policy reforms.

The period 2000–2010 was a turbulent time for the FET college sector. The national government intervened with at least nine major policy initiatives. The first of these occurred in July 2001 with the publication of *A New Institutional Landscape* (DoE 2001), which recommended the establishment of 50 public FET colleges created out of the merger of the 152 former technical colleges. Responsibility for implementing the mergers fell to the nine provincial education departments (DoE 2008). This difficult process of change took right up until 2006 to reach finalisation. A primary aim of these mergers was to create a set of mega-institutions comprising consolidated resources and systems, which would be able to overcome some of the historical inequalities that existed between the apartheid-built former technical colleges.

The passing of the Further Education and Training Colleges Act 16 of 2006 (FET Act) was a second key moment in the government's attempts to transform the sector. The FET Act focused primarily on the construction of a new vision for the sector as a 'modern, vibrant FET college system' built on a 'foundation of lifelong learning and responsive to the needs of the 21st Century' (DoE 2008: 8). A key component of this modernisation was the launching of a new curriculum

framework – the National Certificate Vocational (NCV) – and a new governance structure, with independent college councils granted significant autonomy to steer institutions and employ their own staff.

The National Certificate Vocational

The launch of the new NCV curriculum in 2007 was the third, and by far the most decisive, moment for the FET college sector in terms of institutional change. It had a dramatic impact on the sector, both positive and negative. The NCV represented a major initiative to shift college provision away from past forms of training, which had been perceived to be based on a rather narrow trade training model. The government sought, through the NCV, to focus on 'general vocational programmes which supported the development of vocational skills with a sufficient breadth of knowledge and a strong general education foundation' (DoE 2008: 14).

The NCV curriculum at NQF levels 2, 3 and 4 was developed in 2006, workshopped with stakeholders and finally implemented for the first time in January 2007. Its rollout in the period 2007–2010 had a hugely disruptive impact on the sector, triggering several new problems, including a rapid decline in enrolments in the old trade-oriented NATED ('N') programmes (the theoretical component of the old apprenticeship system). In particular, the change management process around the NCV was problematic, with insufficient institutional support for the training of FET college lecturers to cope with the new curricula, and with extremely blunt instruments steering the restructuring. For example, funding norms were introduced that prioritised NCV enrolments at the expense of 'N' enrolments (which received no funding). An 80 per cent cap was also imposed on college enrolments – only 20 per cent of enrolments would be allowed in programmes other than the NCV. Eighty per cent of enrolments had to form part of the NCV (DoE 2008). These crude instruments were not sufficiently sensitive to the difficulties of change and transition.

The publication of the *National Plan for Further Education and Training Colleges in South Africa* in December 2008 was the fourth substantive policy intervention in the sector during the past decade. A key feature of the plan was the marketing and 'branding' of the colleges as 'institutions of choice', primarily through building a new vision and mission for the sector based on the following goals: increasing youth and adult participation in FET colleges to one million enrolled students by 2014; introducing a system of programme qualification mixes (PQMs) to ensure differentiated delivery; and building strong linkages with industry in support of work experience opportunities (DoE 2008; DHET 2010a).

The fifth change of the decade came in June 2009 with the installation of a new political administration under the leadership of President Jacob Zuma. Several new government departments were created, including the integrated, post-school Department of Higher Education and Training

(DHET), which was ceded regulatory authority over three critical subsectors of the post-school system: FET colleges, higher education and skills development.

FET colleges were administered for a long time at the provincial government level. Ever since 1994, this responsibility fell to the nine provincial departments of education. However, in June 2009, FET colleges became a national competence, as is the case for higher education. This was a dramatic reversal of steering mechanisms proposed in the FET plan released only 6 months earlier, which focused on the role of the 'Inter-Provincial Committee for FET Colleges'. Prior to June 2009, these provincial bodies were the institutional architecture that drove the implementation of FET policies in the nine provinces (DoE 2008).

The sixth and most recent policy intervention in the FET college sector was the publication of the *Green Paper for Post-School Education and Training* in January 2012 (DHET 2012a). The Green Paper commits the DHET to a number of new and ambitious targets to be attained by 2030: the department wants to see university headcount enrolments reach 1.5 million by 2030 (almost double current enrolments) and 4 million headcount enrolments in colleges and other post-school institutions (DHET 2012a). It also believes that the integration of education and training functions into a single, unified national department and ministry of higher education and training will resolve many of the problems previously faced in the VET sector.

The rise and fall of the NCV and 'N' programmes

As indicated above, the NCV was introduced in 2007 to solve a wide array of problems associated with the 'N' courses. These had to do with poor quality teaching, weak linkages with industry, and antiquated technology (DHET 2010a). The 'N' courses were trade-oriented and not sufficiently flexible and modern to be expanded outside of the traditionally narrow confines of engineering. In particular, it was a poor curricular framework for new occupational fields emerging in the services sector.

In its attempt to modernise the curriculum, the government required that all 14 new fields of NVC study incorporate fundamentals such as language and mathematics; and its greater attention to the integration of theory and practice means that the NCV has become more academically challenging than the 'N' programmes (DoE 2010). It requires all students to enrol for a language, life orientation (which includes a business computing component) and mathematics or mathematical literacy course over and above their four vocational subjects per NQF level. These additional requirements attempt to compensate for weaknesses evident in the basic education system (DHET 2010a). The NCV represents a dramatic shift in curriculum structure and process away from the old 'N' mode of teaching, as is illustrated in Table 3.1.

The description of the NCV in Table 3.1 is ideal-type and

theoretical. In practice, in its short lifespan of six years, many problems have emerged, which have undermined its potential impact. The next section discusses a number of these problems (many of them unexpected and unintended).

NCV and 'N' enrolments

The flat structure of enrolments over the past decade has been a major underpinning problem. The FET college sector in 2010 comprised 332 580 headcount learners, enrolled as shown in Table 3.2.

As is evident in Table 3.2, aggregate enrolment remained relatively flat during the period 2007–2010, despite government policy, which has sought to expand enrolments up to one million learners by 2014, and despite extensive financial investment in the sector. The provision of bursaries to students enrolling for the NCV has also not boosted aggregate enrolment in the sector. The factors contributing to this scenario have not yet been determined by research, but one cause for concern is the fairly dramatic decline in the 'N' programmes. Enrolments in the N1–N3 fields have been brutally diminished, including in engineering studies, which is a key component in the training of artisans in South Africa. The primary reason for this reduction was to make space for the new NCV programmes that were introduced in 2007.

Another factor in this enrolment decline is that the government has acted erroneously in restricting the growth of post-N3 enrolments for more than a decade. For example, in 2001, the *New Institutional Landscape* document instructed the sector to focus only on N1–N3 provision rather than the post-N3 levels. The document suggested reducing post-N3 delivery to no more than 10 per cent of total provision. In 2006, the FET Act capped the provision of NQF level 5 and 6 courses in FET colleges. If colleges wanted to offer higher education programmes at NQF levels 5 and 6, they would require prior ministerial approval to do so. These programmes also had to be managed under the authority of an accredited higher education provider. The FET plan of 2008 suggested that only 20 per cent of provision should be in non-NCV-related training programmes, including post-FET courses.

As a consequence of these rather short-sighted directives, post-N3 provision was reduced from 57 per cent of total enrolments in 1998 to 44 per cent by 2010. This trajectory of restriction poses problems today for those colleges that have the ability to build stronger articulation pathways between the FET colleges and higher education, particularly the universities of technology.

It is a strange irony, therefore, that enrolments in the N4–N6 programmes remained relatively high in 2010, in defiance of the restrictive government policy during the 2007–2009 period. The current composition of the FET college system has become highly distorted because of the blunt instruments used to enforce change over the past decade. The current programmatic composition the FET college system is shown in Table 3.3.

Tough curriculum standards

As indicated above, the NCV comprises a far higher curriculum standard than that applied previously to the 'N' programmes. Creating a new curriculum with higher cognitive and pedagogic demands than its precursor has created new problems for the sector. For example, to acquire an NCV, students need to achieve 40 per cent in the two fundamental (compulsory) subjects: the required official language and life orientation. They also need to achieve 30 per cent in mathematics or mathematical literacy (another compulsory module). Lastly, then need to achieve 50 per cent in all four vocational subjects (DoE 2010).

It appears that many learners do not meet these compulsory requirements and are unable to proceed to the next NCV level. They might have passed a few of the seven modules in each NCV level but they do not attain the full qualification. The department has made an administrative decision that learners can progress to the next NCV level carrying a maximum of three failed subjects, which they would need to 'catch up'. This has now created a huge bottleneck in the system, which is difficult to clear. The problem has definitely affected completion rates at the NCV level 4, although the exact scale of these progression problems is not yet known.

A second curriculum-related problem is that the current teaching force finds it difficult to teach the NCV after a lifetime of teaching only 'N' courses. Most college lecturing staff were inducted into the teaching profession through offering the 'N' courses, which had no practical component. This was because these courses were connected historically to the apprenticeship scheme, which had its own internal link to work experience and practical training. To overcome this serious deficiency in the NCV curriculum, the practical component of each of the vocational subjects has to be combined with the practical assessment task conducted during the year – the integrated summative assessment task (ISAT). College lecturers and their students have found undertaking this task very challenging as a result of the lack of experience in using ISAT (DHET 2010b). Part of the problem is that most college lecturers have a technical qualification at NQF levels 2–5, and no formal pedagogical training (DHET 2010b). They are, therefore, not familiar with the methodology around integrated summative assessment. Another problem is that only a minority of college lecturers maintain their industry linkages and experience base. For example, in a recent survey, only 30 per cent of engineering lecturers surveyed had recent industry-based work experience (DHET 2010b). Complicating this picture even further, many college lecturers are faced with multiple schooling levels in one NCV class. Lecturers, thus, struggle to cater for learners who may have a Grade 12 certificate sitting alongside those who only have a Grade 9 or 10 in the same class (DHET 2010b).

Table 3.1: Key differences between the 'N' and NCV programmes at FET colleges

	Average age of learner	'N' programme	NCV programme
Qualification level	16 years old	N1 (equivalent to Grade 10)	NCV 2 (NQF level 2)
	17 years old	N2 (equivalent to Grade 11)	NCV 3 (NQF level 3)
	18 years old	N3 (equivalent to Grade 12 – final year of secondary school)	NCV 4 (NQF level 4)
	19–21 years old	N4-6 (post-FET provision)	(NQF level 5)
Assessment		Exam-oriented	Exams plus a practical assessment task
Curriculum model		Content-based learning	Outcomes-based learning
Duration		Six months for business studies and three months for engineering studies	One year per NQF level Three years for a NCV 4 qualification
Financial sponsorship		Apprentices sponsored by employer Other students are private and pay full fees	NSFAS bursaries available

THREE

Table 3.2: Total enrolments, FET college sector, 2007–2010

	Total 'N' enrolments	Total NCV enrolments	Other enrolments	Total enrolled
2007	245 230	31 414	45 449	322 093
2008	178 086	81 742	41 250	301 078
2009	175 999	166 469	42 638	385 106
2010	169 803	122 257	40 520	332 580

Source: Cosser, Kraak & Reddy (2012)

Table 3.3: Programme composition of the FET college system by programme type, 2010

	Programme	Total enrolments	Percentage
1	N1–N3 (FET-level provision)	24 939	7
2	N4–N6 (post-FET provision)	144 864	43
3	NCV	122 257	38
4	Other	40 520	12
	Total	332 580	100

Source: Cosser et al. (2012)

Poor completion rates

Accurate data on NCV completion rates are hard to come by. Progression rates at the 'full qualification' level – for example, reporting on those who attained the NCV levels 2, 3 and 4 – are extremely low. In 2009, for example, 8 216 learners graduated with NCV level 2 and 789 with NCV level 3. However, total enrolments in 2009 comprised 93 293 candidates for NCV level 2 and 24 637 for NCV level 3 (DoE 2010). This suggests a completion rate of 8.8 per cent for NCV level 2 and 3.2 per cent for NCV level 3. Cohort progression rates (comprising the three years of the senior secondary school vocational track – NCV levels 2, 3 and 4) appear to be equally low. For example, of the 26 540 students enrolled for NCV level 2 in 2007, only 1 194 passed the level 4 NCV examinations in 2009 – a 4.4 per cent 'cohort' progression rate. Colleges were not able to grow new enrolments in 2010, because of the backlog of mature students needing to repeat failed subjects.

Curricula not aligned to industry

Many employers and vocational education specialists claim that the NCV has not been adequately aligned to the needs of industry. In addition, colleges are currently ill-equipped to help students find workplace experience. The strongest reflection of employer abstention from employing the outputs of the FET college system are the high rates of unemployment amongst graduates of the college system. Cosser et al. (2003) and Gewer (2010) provide useful insights into the employment prospects of FET college graduates. Cosser et al. (2003) undertook a relatively large-scale and representative tracer study of graduate destinations in the FET college sector, choosing the 1999 cohort of graduates. The findings of the survey were alarming – 31 per cent were unemployed or economically inactive for other reasons. In a similar tracer survey of 2003 college graduates, Gewer (2010) finds that one-third of respondents reported not having been in employment. It must be noted that at least an additional third of participants in both surveys continued to study in the FET college sector, which is both positive, in the sense that people continue to seek additional education, and negative, in that it might reflect avoidance behaviour, given the high levels of unemployment in the labour market.

In the light of the above problems, the NCV does not represent a huge improvement over the shortcomings of the 'N' courses, which were criticised for precisely the same reasons. Colleges have also not succeeded in forging partnerships with other institutions in society. In the absence of strong societal linkages, the colleges have become very isolated, failing to help construct pathways for graduates into work.

Conclusion

The past decade has been a period of dramatic change for the FET college sector – change which, unfortunately, has triggered considerable institutional instability. Key features



Many employers and vocational education specialists claim that the NCV has not been adequately aligned to the needs of industry. In addition, colleges are currently ill-equipped to help students find workplace experience.

of this crisis have been described, including many of the unexpected and unintended consequences of poorly implemented change. Many of these policy errors have been acknowledged by the new political administration that came into office in 2009. As a consequence, the government has reversed some of the more problematic decisions made earlier in the transition. Firstly, the department decided in December 2009 to delay the phasing out of the N1–3 courses, essentially to allow colleges to continue to register students for N1–3 courses where there is demonstrable industry support (DHET 2010a). The Green Paper agreed with this decision to 'extend the life of these programmes until the N courses are fully reviewed' and noted that 'there will continue to be a need for the colleges to offer programmes which constitute the theoretical component of apprenticeships that are being revived and strengthened' (DHET 2012a: 23).

Secondly, the FET Round Table and Summit processes in 2010 noted that the N4–N6 courses provide 'a useful pathway for students from the FET college sector, as well as adult learners only able to study part-time, to enter higher education' (DHET 2010a: 30). The DHET has committed itself to relook at ways of establishing linkages for students between FET colleges and higher education programmes (DHET 2010a). The Green Paper also acknowledges that 'there is an urgent need to review and replace or improve the N4–N6 programmes' (DHET 2012a: 23)

The most significant change of all has been the transfer of administrative control over FET colleges from the provinces to single, unified national government. This has required substantial changes to FET legislation and to the country's Constitution. These legislative reforms were formalised on 15 May 2012 when the Further Education and Training Colleges Amendment Act was signed into law – a move that has effectively put all FET colleges in the country under the authority of the national DHET (DHET 2012b).

Administrative silos

The pooling of administrative control over all VET institutions in the national DHET comprises a major and potentially positive change. A fundamental cause of policy failure in the past has been the turf battles between the two national Departments of Education and Labour, with animosity generally

characterising dynamics between the two. Soobrayan and Marock (2007) describe it as an ongoing 'tug of war', which weakened co-ordination efforts around national human resources development.

This animosity negatively affected the evolution of the FET college system during the 2000s, with policy imposed on FET colleges from above. Employers were not consulted in any substantive way, and curriculum experts were ignored. The new NVC policy framework was not piloted, and was imposed on the college system in 2007 with the dramatic consequences already described. The restructuring in South Africa shares many of the flawed elements of the UK model of VET reform. The following five problems in both countries stand out as being particularly severe:

1. **Neglect of the demand side:** As in the UK, the South African college reforms were founded on a supply-side approach of increasing the output of graduates with vocational qualifications, while leaving a low-skill, low-wage business environment unchanged. This approach has been 'consistently unable to ensure that improved skill supply is matched by greater demand for, and utilisation of, skills in the workplace' (Lanning & Lawton 2012: 20). Delbridge et al. (2006) argue that skills can make a substantive contribution to productivity only if they are effectively deployed in the firm. Supply-side skills policies are not sufficient.
2. **Lack of employer 'buy-in':** Although the FET college reforms in South Africa and the UK were billed as 'employer-led', the reality has been that few or no actual employers were directly involved. This has led to 'disillusionment for both employers and public sector partners and a degree of cynicism about the extent to which real employer views are being captured' (UKCES 2010: 14). This lack of employer buy-in throws up a big gap between the official policy rhetoric about 'employer-led' reform and the actual reality on the ground.
3. **'Statist' models:** In contrast to employer-led approaches, the system that has evolved in the UK (and South Africa) is civil servant dominated, with the government imposing national skills policy frameworks on employers without their consent and buy-in. The UKCES (2010: 16) states this contradictory reality bluntly: 'the public sector is the main driver behind some "employer-led" arrangements so the idea of employer leadership is a misnomer'. Lanning and Lawton (2012: 3) argue that the failure to engage employers has led to an over-reliance on centralised, state-led programmes and institutions to fill the gap.
4. **Absence of partnerships with the college sector:** Unlike the American community college system, the South African and UK college sectors have failed to establish strong partnerships with industry in localised or regional

settings, which meet employer demand for skills through customised and specifically tailored training packages. The absence of these sorts of partnership strategies signifies the failure of the college sector to attend to the demand-side needs of the economy.

5. **Poor progression from VET to higher education:** Progression is a major problem for learners who graduate with VET qualifications in Anglo-Saxon countries, including the USA, UK and South Africa. In all contexts, graduates with NVQs struggle to gain access to higher education degree programmes. Tertiary-level VET is highly underdeveloped in all of these countries, compared with Central European and Scandinavian countries. For example, transfer from two-year associate degree qualifications obtained at community colleges in the USA into four-year university degree-awarding colleges is very low. The situation is similar in the UK and South Africa (Osterman 2010; Kraak 2008; Fuller & Unwin 2012).

Lanning and Lawton (2012) argue that the strong focus on skills as the solution to weak productivity, low wages and poor progression opportunities has led to an overreliance on the state to fill the gap left by the market, and has overplayed the ability of skills policy alone to achieve economic competitiveness and social justice.

Continuous institutional instability

An additional problem rooted in the UK system but also evident in the South African FET college system is never-ending reform, in the UK dating as far back as the Thatcher era of the late 1970s. These constant reforms deprive the VET systems in both countries of stability and continuity. It takes at least five years for institutional reforms to take effect, yet constant state reforms in structure and legislation continually undo the impact that might have been achieved (UKCES 2010).

The irony facing South Africa today is that, while it admires the developmental state capabilities of countries in South East Asia such as Singapore and South Korea – capabilities which are based on the capacity of the state to steer and reshape demand-side conditions – South Africa's education and training reforms mirror far more closely the neo-liberal market-led restructuring of the UK and other Anglo-Saxon countries such as Australia. Here, the faith in the 'education gospel' around supply-side interventions, while the demand-side is left unchanged and subject to market forces, appears naïve in the light of the 'misdiagnosis' described by Keep and James (2012) above. This is the Anglo-Saxon burden which South Africa appears unable to break away from. The ideological influence of the former coloniser and the global belief that the knowledge-based economy requires vast supply-side inputs continues to be dominant and influential in former British colonies such as South Africa.

References

- Ashton D, Sung J & Turbin J (2000) Towards a framework for the comparative analysis of national systems of skill formation. *International Journal for Training and Development* 4(1): 8–25.
- Cosser M, Badroodien A, McGrath S & Maja B (eds) (2003) *Technical college responsiveness in South Africa*. Cape Town: HSRC Publishers.
- Cosser M, Kraak A & Reddy V (eds) (2012) Institutional identity and operational success in the further education and training college sector. Education and Skills Development Research Programme, Human Sciences Research Council, unpublished monograph.
- Delbridge R, Edwards P, Forth J, Miskell P & Payne J (2006) *The organization of productivity: Re-thinking skills and work organisation*. London: Advanced Institute of Management Research.
- DHET (Department of Higher Education and Training) (2010a) *Document for discussion: Proposed way forward: Towards finding resolutions in partnership with stakeholders*. FET Round Table, DHET, Pretoria, 9 April.
- DHET (2010b) *Report of the further education and training round table of 9 April 2010*. Pretoria: DHET.
- DHET (2012a) *Green paper for post-school education and training*. Pretoria: DHET.
- DHET (2012b) Media alert: Amendments to FET Colleges Act and the Skills Development Act to give wider powers to Minister of Higher Education and Training, 15 May. Pretoria: DHET.
- DoE (Department of Education) (2001) *A new institutional landscape for FET*. Pretoria: DoE.
- DoE (2008) *National Plan for Further Education and Training Colleges in South Africa*. Government Gazette Number 31712, 12 December.
- DoE (2010) *Education statistics in South Africa at a glance in 2009*. Pretoria: DoE.
- Froy F, Giguère S & Meghnagi M (2012) *Skills for competitiveness: A synthesis report*. Local Economic and Employment Development (LEED) Working Papers 2012/9, OECD Publishing.
- Fuller A & Unwin L (2012) *Banging on the door of the university: The complexities of progression from apprenticeship and other vocational programmes in England*. ESRC Centre for Skills, Knowledge and Organizational Performance (SKOPE), Monograph No. 14.
- Gewer A (2010) Choices and chances: FET colleges and the transition from school to work. Paper presented at the Development Policy Research Unit (DPRU) Conference, 27–29 October 2010, Indaba Hotel and Conference Centre, Johannesburg.
- Giguère S (ed.) (2008) *More than just jobs: Workforce development in a skills-based economy*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- Grubb WN (2006) *Vocational education and training: Issues for a thematic review*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- Hamilton V (2012) *Career pathway and cluster skill development: Promising models from the United States*. Local Economic and Employment Development (LEED) Working Papers 2012/14, OECD Publishing.
- Keep E & Mayhew K (1999) The assessment: Knowledge, skills, and competitiveness. *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 15(1): 1–15.
- Keep E & Mayhew K (2010) Moving beyond skills as a social and economic panacea? *Work, Employment and Society* 24(3): 567–77.
- Keep E & James S (2012) A Bermuda triangle of policy? 'Bad jobs', skills policy and incentives to learn at the bottom end of the labour market. *Journal of Education Policy* 27(2): 211–230.
- Kraak A (2008) Incoherence in the South African labour market for intermediate skills. *Journal of Education and Work* 21(3): 197–216.
- Kraak A & Perold H (eds) (2003) *Human resources development review 2003: Education, employment, and skills in South Africa*. Cape Town: HSRC Press.
- Lakes RD (2012) State sector strategies: The new workforce development in the USA. *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 10(1): 13–29.
- Lanning T & Lawton K (2012) *No train no gain: Beyond free-market and state-led skills policy*. London: Institute for Public Policy Research.
- Martinez-Fernandez C & Choi K (2012) *Skills development pathways in Asia*. Local Economic and Employment Development (LEED) Working Papers 2012/12, OECD Publishing.
- OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) (2010) *Learning for jobs*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- OECD (2011) *Local job creation: How employment and training agencies can help*. A signature project in the OECD LEED Programme of Work. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- OECD (2013) *Local job creation: How employment and training agencies can help*. Draft report for the United States. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- Osterman P (2010) Community colleges: Promise, performance and policy. Unpublished mimeo, Sloan School of Business, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- Payne J (2007) *Sector skills councils and employer engagement: Delivering the 'employer-led' skills agenda in England*. ESRC Centre for Skills, Knowledge and Organizational Performance (SKOPE), Research Paper No. 78.
- Payne J & Keep E (2011) *One step forward, two steps back? Skills policy in England under the coalition government*. ESRC Centre for Skills, Knowledge and Organizational Performance (SKOPE), Research Paper No. 102.
- Soobrayan B & Marock C (2007) Study to ascertain how best to plan, coordinate, integrate, manage, monitor, evaluate and report on the National Human Resource Development Strategy for South Africa. Unpublished Singizi Consulting report commissioned by the government.
- Sung J, Ashton D & Raddon A (2009) *Futureskills Scotland: Product market strategies and workforce skills*. Edinburgh: Smarter Scotland.
- UKCES (UK Commission for Employment and Skills) (2010) *What's the deal? The employer voice in the employment and skills system*. London: UKCES.