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CHALLENGES FACING VET
TRANSFORMATION IN THE SADC REGION

Presented by

Salim Akoojee and Simon McGrath

Human Sciences Research Council
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INTRODUCTION: LOCATING VET NATIONALLY AND GLOBALLY

Across the globe, vocational education and training (VET) systems have experienced a period of almost unprecedented transformation since the beginning of the 1990s. The SADC region is no exception and the process of transformation is continuing across member states. This paper highlights seven aspects of the far-ranging reform agenda and raises a series of challenges that lie ahead for the region's systems in turning the new vision into reality.

CONTEXTUALISING ISSUES

Before examining the specific challenges facing SADC VET systems it is important to explore briefly how these systems are shaped by external and internal forces, which both constrain and motivate the changes envisaged.

National debates

VET policies sit at a crucial policy nexus. It is typical for the function to be divided at the very least between organisations that form part of the national education system and those that have a labour market or industrial orientation. More generally, this reflects a broader role in bridging between national concerns for economic and for social policy.

VET policy, thus, is profoundly shaped by a series of cross-cutting policy concerns. First, VET is seen as a crucial tool of economic development (Godfrey 1991; Crouch, Finegold and Sako 1999; King and McGrath 2002). Although not without controversy (see especially Wolf 2002), policymakers internationally have seen the development of better technical skills as a key element of improving economic performance. As we shall see below, the economic imperative for skills development is accelerated by a number of international discourses.

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

Third, VET has been very powerfully linked over at least 35 years with the growing problem of youth unemployment. In OECD countries, the expectation that VET systems could solve mounting youth unemployment developed strongly in the 1970s as the advanced economies went into a period of series economic weakness that ended the full employment era of the 1950s and 1960s. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, VET systems were being revolutionised in these countries, most spectacularly in the Anglophone countries, as we shall see below (Crouch, Finegold and Sako 1999; Wolf 2002). However, for the SADC region, the crisis of youth unemployment can be dated to even earlier. Several education systems in the region saw massive expansions in the early-to-mid 1960s, linked to independence. However, without a similar expansion in the formal sector, a crisis of educated unemployment quickly emerged (Foster 1965; Dore 1976). Increasingly, new programmes emerged to address this challenge, such as the Brigades in Botswana and the Village (later Youth) Polytechnics in Kenya. More recently (see below), this interest has transmuted into programmes that seek to reorient VET towards self-employment (Fluitman 1989; Grierson and Mackenzie 1996; Grierson 1999; King and McGrath 2002; McGrath 2003a).

Fourth, and most recently, VET systems have also become linked to debates about responding to the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the region (McGrath 2002). The massive death, illness and sero-positivity rates in the region have huge implications for skills across the region. International agencies have suggested that prevalence rates are particularly serious amongst skilled workers (UNECA 1999; ILO 2001). UNESCO has shown particularly serious impacts within teaching (IIEP 2000). An estimate from Namibia put the overall loss in GNP at 8% in 1996 (UNECA 1999) and it is inconceivable that this figure should not be higher now in a number of SADC countries. The attempt to make good the skills loss through HIV/AIDS will put a huge financial burden on both states and employers for the foreseeable future, whilst at the same time the pandemic is likely to depress household expenditures on education and training (Bennell 2000). The position of public VET providers as important social institutions places on them a particular responsibility to seek to address the issues of AIDS education and prevention (Danida 2002).

International influences

The discussions above about economic development cannot be easily separated from the current orthodoxies about the economic sphere, and its alleged primacy over other spheres such as the social, cultural or spiritual. VET systems, as with other sectoral interventions, are profoundly shaped by the discourse of globalisation. Whilst there are strong reasons for scepticism regarding the actual spread and extent of globalisation in the economic domain (Hirst and Thompson 1996: Crouch, Finegold and Sako 1999; Held et al. 1999; King and McGrath 2002); the ideological power of the notion cannot be denied (Held et al. 1999; King and McGrath 2002 and 2003). From the discourse of globalisation emerge two interpenetrated strands of profound importance for VET policy.

First, there is the competitiveness strand. It is argued that education and training becomes an increasingly central element of government policy (Held et al. 1999). However, rapid technological change means that a set of new generic or core skills take on relative importance over older notions of technical skill. The implications for VET, thus, are complex and contested (see Crouch, Finegold and Sako 1999 and Wolf 2002 for very different readings of the implications in OECD contexts).

Second, there is the state minimisation strand. Global competitiveness rests of low taxation and the attraction of foreign direct investment. The more that the state intervenes in the economy, the more likely it is to be subject to both an outflow of international companies and a speculative attack on the currency. Thus, VET becomes one of the few areas of policy that it is considered legitimate for the state to have a role in (Held et al. 1999; King and McGrath 2002). However, even here it is widely accepted that the state should cede most of the role to employers and the market (Crouch, Finegold and Sako 1999; Keep 1999; Wolf 2002).

The shifting sands of aid policy

Aid policy has gone through radical changes in the past decade, with serious implications for VET provision (McGrath 1998a; McGrath 2002; King and McGrath 2003). Since 1996, a series of International Development Targets, now metamorphosed into the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and an emphasis on reformed aid relationships have become intertwined in a new phase of aid discourse.

The MDGs primarily have an indirect, but nonetheless profound, influence on VET and skills development. Skills development was one of the many important commitments of the

Copenhagen Social Development Summit of 1996 that did not get to become an MDG (King and McGrath 2002). This, coupled with the already powerful effects of the Jomtien Conference on Education for All, has meant that VET has slipped down the donor agenda, at the very same time as it has been moving up the domestic agendas of the major donor countries (McGrath 2002). This apparently perverse policy contrast is justified by the view that poor countries need to focus primarily on basic education. However, it offers nothing in the way of a plausible explanation of how poor countries are supposed to benefit from globalisation. Whilst clearly the conflicting priorities of basic education and VET need to be managed, it appears that there has been an inadequate emphasis on VET in most countries in the SADC region.

Over time, the initial notion of the IDTs has led to a new architecture for development cooperation (e.g. PRSPs and HIPC) that serves to reinforce the donor orthodoxy of a focus on basic needs rather than engines of balanced development. Moreover, beneath the overarching poverty focus lie a series of other cross-cutting aid objectives. These are good governance, gender equality, environmental sustainability, HIV/AIDS, youth, etc. Countries such as Denmark, Germany, Japan and Switzerland (WGICSD 2002) are increasingly expecting their sectoral projects and programmes to address these issues as well as the traditional concerns of the particular sector. At the same time, aid policy has increasingly also mirrored the language of globalisation and privatisation that is so pervasive in the donor countries.

Beneath the over-arching structure of the PRSPs, there is an increasing push by some donors for sectoral programmes. Under this approach, government and participating donors are expected to agree a macro-policy and funding model for a whole sector. In theory, but rarely in practice, this is then supposed to lead to budgetary support, whereby these donors give funds directly to Government to support the agreed programme, rather than to specific projects.

All of these trends in aid policy and practice have important implications for VET. We have already shown how the absence of skills from the language of the MDGs has undermined international support to VET, as it was traditionally understood. Moreover, sector programmes are leading a number of donor countries (e.g. Denmark and Germany) to concentrate on a few sectors (3-5) in a few countries (c.20) (WGICSD 2002). This furthers the likelihood of skills development receiving reduced attention. Moreover, skills development is by its nature cross-sectoral. This makes it harder to organise into sectoral programmes than education or health (WGICVTSD 1999). It also implies the need for a skills development perspective to be included within all sectoral programmes (McGrath 2002).

THE CHALLENGES FACING VET REFORM

All of the above forces and trends have had their impacts on VET practices internationally, albeit in a very complex and nationally differentiated manner. Just as with the discourses explored thus far in the paper, ideas about what are good practices in VET have changed profoundly in the recent past.

Some of the elements we will discuss in this section can plausibly be held to be broadly international. However, it is apparent that VET systems retain significant national characteristics, notwithstanding the discourse of globalisation (Ashton and Green 1996; Crouch, Finegold and Sako 1999; King and McGrath 2002). There are strong Anglophone, Francophone and Germanic systems of skills development. Some of the discussion in this section perhaps should best be seen as of relevance for the Anglophone developed

countries from which it emerged (especially Britain and Australia) but has come to have profound impacts on SADC systems, both through aid and a more subtle diffusion of ideas. Other elements are clearly donor-driven but arose out of concerns to address the perceived problems of African VET systems.

The scope of recent trends in VET is remarkable and as overwhelming for the analyst as it must be for the planner, practitioner and learner. In an attempt to place some order on the variety of changes, we will suggest seven areas under which analysis will take place. We will seek to highlight a series of key challenges under each heading that are likely to require attention by those attempting to reform SADC's VET systems.

Curriculum and qualifications

The SADC region has been heavily influenced by the transformation of thinking about curriculum and qualifications that has emerged from the Anglophone developed countries in the past 20 years (e.g. Jessup 1990). Indeed, it is to part of this transformation that this conference is devoted. Older trends towards competency-based modular training and long-standing concerns about the equivalence between the vocational and academic strands of education, have been superceded by a radical new vision of National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) that bring together the certification of all learning under one "seamless system", designed to encourage transparency, parity of esteem and progression. With NQFs have also come a new language of unit standards and new processes of quality assurance.

The SADC members have agreed to work towards a Regional Qualifications Framework and several members have national models in existence or in development. However, it is important to be rigorous in addressing both the positive and negative lessons that come from international experiences in developing and implementing such systems. It is vital that experiences from countries at a very different stage of development from that of most SADC members are not used uncritically in contexts to which they ill-apply. It is crucial that the role of international donors in selling such ideas be dispassionately critiqued.

From experiences in the region and elsewhere with NQFs, a series of major challenges can be identified.

Cost

NQFs are typically very expensive. Therefore, attention needs to be paid to a sustainable funding mechanism. The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), for instance, remains dependent on donor funding. Given donors' concerns with poverty reduction, it is not self-evident that they will provide long-term funding for NQFs. In any case, donor dependence is undesirable. How then will NQFs across the region be funded? Will the RQF itself require significant running costs?

Take-up

The speed and spread of take-up of new awards has often been slow. Wolf (2002) shows how limited the spread of new awards has been in England, even for industry-related qualifications. The impact of NQF-related notions is almost entirely absent in the British school systems. The South African experience points also to the time it takes for new

qualifications to spread. Eight years after the establishment of SAQA, the key VET college exit certificate is still not in place. The related issues of slowness and spread point to the need to see the development of NQFs as a long-term process, not a quick fix. Also, experience suggests that many providers (especially amongst the growing private segment) may not see merits in adopting NQF-aligned awards. Should, and can, governments' do anything about this?

Quality assurance

With the complexity of NQFs has come formalised systems of quality assurance. However, such systems have struggled to get a balance between internal and external moderation; leading to major re-design work as in Australia. For the poorer countries in the region, there will be a particular challenge of building rigorous but flexible systems. In England, at least, there have been serious cases of corruption as a result of quality assurance failure (Wolf 2002). This points to the crucial importance of developing quality and funding systems that work.

Transparency

Whilst the language justifying NQFs is attractive, it is important to be honest about the difficulties of living up to the vision to date. Such systems are supposed to be more transparent than older systems. While this is partially true, it is evident that NQFs have spawned a technical language that is almost impossible for learners, parents and employers to understand. This and other factors have made the new systems a wonderful business opportunity for consultants rather than a democratically-owned system. In some cases, this has led to efforts, for instance, to rewrite unit standards in simpler English. However, the challenge is likely to be even more acute in the SADC region than elsewhere in the light of multiple languages and limited literacy (in some areas).

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Progression

NQFs are supposed to deliver on progression. Again, there is evidence that this is working for some. However, we want to highlight two particular failings here. First, systems of recognition of prior learning (RPL) remain relatively weak. In South Africa, for instance, there is still no compelling evidence that RPL has been a major tool for increasing access and certification of those who were excluded from formal education and training opportunities by the Apartheid regime. Second, the logic of progression is that students are always on their way up through NQF levels. However, in South Africa at least, there is clearly both a significant degree of horizontal movement, as well as some official encouragement of this. The vast majority of learners entering South Africa's college sector do so with a school leaving certificate, located at Level 4 on the NQF (Cosser 2003). Yet in college they will typically exit with another Level 4 award. This is logical for them as they expect to improve their labour market chances through this second award, but it does do violence to the most simplistic versions of the NQF logic. At present the South African Department of Labour is seeking to introduce a new venture creation learnership designed to provide another horizontal chance, this time for those exited learnerships without employment. Again, a horizontal move is seen as likely to have the desired labour market impact, rather than a vertical progression. It is clear from these examples that the reality of progression is more complex than some of the slogans and powerpoint presentations around NQFs would lead

us to expect. Policymakers need to think carefully about how they use both vertical and horizontal means of progression most effectively, including through broadly accessible RPL programmes.

Parity of esteem

Parity of esteem is clearly another area where rhetoric runs ahead of reality. There is simply no evidence that simply mapping awards as equivalent leads to them being perceived as equivalent by learners, parents, educational institutions and employers. Belief in the value of new qualifications will only emerge if and when these different stakeholders can see the difference that the new awards make to the lives of learners. The experience of the General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) in England is particularly instructive, given South Africa, at least, appears bound on a similar path. This was an attempt to develop vocationally-oriented awards that would be delivered in schools and which would be seen as of equal value as traditional academic awards. It is evident that these have become awards for the "less academic" and that they are not highly rated by elite higher education institutions (Wolf 2002). Similar attempts to have more vocationally-oriented baccalaureates in France have also largely failed the parity of esteem test (Bourdieu et al. 1999; Crouch, Finegold and Sako 1999). The most positive message to take from this is that Southern African attempts to achieve parity of esteem will require long-term commitments to quality provision and successful outcomes. However, even then scepticism about new ideas may be long-lived.

Integration of education and training

Central to the notion of an NQF is an integration of education and training. However, the assumption that a Framework and an Authority can bring different government departments into real collaboration is clearly simplistic, given the wealth of knowledge we have about organisational and institutional logics (Argyris and Schön 1978; McGrath and King 2002). In South Africa, the Departments of Education and Labour continue to develop their policies with little attempt at articulation (Kraak 2003; McGrath 2003b and c), regardless of the joint *Human Resources Development Strategy* (DoE and DoL 2001). A major NQF-related example of the continuation of non-integration appears to be developing at the moment. There are the beginnings of tensions around the question of equivalence of awards between those offered by Sector Education and Training Authorities and those planned by the Department of Education at NQF level 4. This issue is of central importance to VET providers in the rest of SADC as level 4 is the artisanal and VET college exit level. This points to the larger failure of the NQF to be a vehicle that brings together the education and training systems; employers and educational institutions; public and private providers; and the Departments of Education and Labour. All of these issues may be of considerable importance to the successful development of regional and national frameworks across SADC.

Core skills

There are other elements of the curricular revolution worth highlighting. NQFs have brought with them a new language of core skills, in response to rapid technological change. There are clear merits in attempts to build such skills, but there are also a series of outstanding questions:

Not only may life and/or work skills programmes be difficult to develop and implement, but their justifications may be questionable. Given the huge resource constraints facing education and training, it is crucial that we consider whether life skills instead of being essential are in fact a luxury good. What exactly is their contribution to poverty reduction and sustainable development? Is this significant enough to make them a good investment? Can they be delivered and assessed without excessive bureaucracy? Will they make individuals, communities and nations better able to survive and prosper in the often-harsh world of globalisation? Before suggesting that life skills programmes need to be spread, it is important to ask whether there is sufficient evidence that life skills improve lives. If not, there are many other ways in which scarce funds can be spent. (WGICSD 2003: 7-8).

Strikingly, given the prominence given to such skills within the new South African approach, we have been unable to find a single paper that provides an analysis of the delivery of such skills within South African workplaces. This will need to be an area of focus in the development of the new RQF.

Modernising apprenticeships

Another new element of the delivery and certification of skills in the South African system, mirroring Australia and Britain, is a new learning programme designed to combine theory, practice and work experience. The learnership approach is beginning to reach significant numbers of South African learners, but has not yet been rigorously evaluated. There do appear to be merits in this new approach, but it remains unlikely that its enrolments will ever match the numbers of learners going through the public college system or that the majority of learnership graduates will quickly find wage employment. Moreover, British experience has pointed to the limited take-up of such awards there in the growing service sector (Fuller and Unwin 2003). Whether the learnership model has any merits as a replacement for moribund apprenticeship systems in much of the SADC system is unclear given its costs and the limited numbers of large formal sector employers. Whether the learnership is the most appropriate model or not, improving the numbers and quality of apprenticeships needs to be addressed.

Encouraging employers to take training seriously

Since the World Bank se World Bank seof 1991 (World Bank 1991), focus in African VET systems has increasingly shifted towards measures that are designed to encourage employers to play a bigger role in training, whether in terms of their own staff or in terms of the national training system. In this, there is a clear attempt to build on approaches that have had success in other regions (e.g. Latin America – Ducci 1991 and 1994 and East Asia – Ashton and Green 1996).

Across a number of African countries, this new focus has resulted in the development of national training authorities (Johanson 2001). The idea behind such authorities is that they will represent the range of relevant stakeholders, but especially business and will move control of the training system out of the hands of the bureaucracy. It is believed that such a

move will make provision more responsive to the needs of employers and, hence, will encourage greater employer involvement in training. One important aspect of responsiveness is that curricular reform can be swifter as problems and new needs can be communicated faster than under a bureaucratic system.

Often these authorities are linked with some form of funding mechanism for training, although not always. The mechanism is typically some sort of levy-grant system in which employers are required to contribute a fixed percentage of turnover to a central fund, administered by the authority, and through which employers that are active in training can claim back sums against training delivered.

Although some systems (e.g. that of Mauritius) appear to be developing positively, there has been widespread criticism of the attempt to develop both training authorities and levies in Africa. Danida and the World Bank, two of the leading proponents of these reforms, have found in separate evaluations that many authorities are weak and have limited or no independence from government (Johanson 2001; Danida 2002). Where there is no levy fund, authorities have little chance of independence and little scope for convincing employers of the merits of increased training. Even where funds are present, there can be concerns about their performance. In the South African case, there are still concerns that the system may not be encouraging a change in training practices among enterprises that did not train before the levy (Badroodien 2003). There is a particular perception that smaller enterprises are more likely to treat the levy as a tax rather than to see it as a real incentive to train. This is a widespread problem, although Mauritius appears to be making some progress in this regard.

The South African model of retaining 20% of funds in a National Skills Fund (NSF) with a mandate to focus on new skills, smaller enterprises and other strategic foci also appears to be showing mixed performance to date. Whilst the NSF has been used successfully to encourage SETAs to develop innovative programmes for reaching smaller enterprises in their sectors, there remains a huge under-spend of the NSF funds.

New funding mechanisms for VET are a pressing need. However, there are difficult challenges in delivering on these. There is a danger in the argument, emanating primarily from the World Bank (World Bank 1991; Middleton, Ziderman and Adams 1993; Johanson 2001; Johanson and Adams 2003), that power should be taken out of the hands of government and shifted to that of employers. On the one hand, it is based too much in ideological conviction and does not address sufficiently why governments should relinquish their role. On the other, it presupposes a commitment to involvement in managing training that is far from self-evident (Crouch, Finegold and Sako 1999; King and McGrath 2002; Wolf 2002). Moreover, as both the World Bank (Johanson 2001) and Danida (2002) have been forced to admit, the institutional development challenge of building effective new training authorities is huge. The unspent R3 billion in the NSF also points to the specific challenge of disbursement capacity.

The structural adjustment of the public technical college

At the beginning of the 1990s, the broader trend towards structural adjustment was extended to the public technical college system by the World Bank in its policy paper on *Vocational and Technical Education and Training* (World Bank 1991). This influential statement of World Bank thinking argued that public providers were inefficient purveyors of poor quality training. Instead, the Bank proposed that training should be left far more to the market and preferably to employers (see above and below). However, the Bank did allow some

continuing role for public providers; and African governments, in any case, continued to see state provision of VET as important.

Nonetheless, public providers have been subjected to wide-ranging pressures for reform, (Bennell et al. 1999; Afenyadu et al. 2001; King and McGrath 2002), many of which mirror trends in Britain and Australia (Unwin 2003a and b). Two main strands to the reforms can be seen.

First, public colleges are encouraged to be more like private providers. This means becoming more like enterprises, with CEOs rather than rectors; more autonomy from the state; greater cost recovery; and increased competition between colleges (Wolf 2002; McGrath 2003d; Unwin 2003a).

Second, colleges are enjoined to be more responsive to the labour market (King and McGrath 2002; McGrath 2003d and e; Unwin 2003a). In practice, this largely means having better links to employers, for instance through greater employer involvement on council; and being able to develop and deliver new learning programmes geared to the needs of individual or groups of employers.

It is entirely appropriate that public providers be encouraged to be more entrepreneurial, efficient and responsive to the labour market. However, there are a series of important challenges in achieving this.

First, it will remain important for governments to manage a balance between college autonomy and college responsiveness to government policy. As we shall argue below, colleges are important tools for national development and need to be seen in this light.

Second, greater cost recovery is a danger if it takes colleges away from educationally sound practices and into money-making for its own sake (McGrath et al. 1995; Danida 2002). For instance, training with production activities have had varying impacts on the quality of learning (Danida 2002).

Third, competition between public providers can also have negative effects. Wolf (2002), for instance, charts some of the tendencies towards unethical marketing and other business practices that entered the English college sector. In England, competition has resulted in some colleges being bankrupted. What is striking about this are examples of colleges whose failure appears to have been linked to an excess of entrepreneurial fervour rather than its absence (Wolf 2002).

Fourth, responsiveness is a highly complex notion (McGrath 2003d; Unwin 2003a). There is a danger in assuming that colleges should be responsive solely to the short-term needs of employers. There is also a need to be cautious about expecting employers to take a more active role in the workings of colleges. The more reciprocal burdens responsiveness places on employers; the less enthusiastic they appear to be about the notion (Crouch, Finegold and Sako 1999; Wolf 2002; McGrath 2003d; Unwin 2003a).

The promotion of private providers

We have already noted the major influence that the World Bank has had in shifting greater emphasis onto the encouragement of private providers. The argument in favour of increased private provision is essentially simple. Because of their necessary relationship with the market, private providers inevitably will be more flexible, effective and efficient than bureaucratised public institutions. There is merit in this argument, but it clearly downplays

the likelihood of market failure. Moreover, it is a large leap of faith to argue further, as the Bank does (Johanson and Adams 2003), that the state should seek to subsidise private providers (McGrath 2003f).

There are practical reasons for caution about an over-emphasis on the role of private providers. The limited evidence to date (Johanson 2001; Atchoarena and Esquieu 2002; Akoojee 2003) suggests that private providers cluster into certain geographical and sectoral areas. They are heavily biased towards urban areas and to commercial and ICT-related programmes. As such, they are not a comprehensive answer to training needs. Moreover, voucher schemes – the preferred tool of the Bank to promote training markets – have a mixed record in Africa to date (Johanson 2001; King and McGrath 2002)

The public colleges as local development institutions

As we noted above, the continued existence of public colleges tends to lead them to be ascribed a broader developmental role by government and certain donors. Especially in rural areas and small towns, colleges where present are highly significant elements of the state's reach and capacity. Thus, there is a tendency to see the college as the location for solutions to development problems beyond simply youth unemployment and economic growth. This tendency is reinforced by the growth of emphasis on cross-cutting concerns by donors. The result is that colleges are increasingly expected to play a major role in breaking down gender inequality; controlling the HIV/AIDS epidemic; and combatting environmental degradation, to name but three concerns.

It is entirely appropriate that governments should seek to make use of the institutions they have in place. However, it is clear that careful attention needs to be given to the efforts of colleges in these areas. Among the practical aspects of this are questions about staff retraining, materials development and timetabling.

Training for the informal economy and self-employment

For public VET colleges and systems across Africa, one of the biggest changes since the start of the 1990s has been an acknowledgement of the need to address the issue of training for the informal economy and self-employment (King and McGrath 2002; McGrath 2003a, c and d). Since this time, a large number of programmes have been developed, typically with donor funding, that have sought to change the focus of public providers, which traditionally had been oriented towards pre-employment preparation for the formal sector.

The arguments for such programmes seemed compelling. These public colleges were massively over-producing graduates for the often tiny formal sector labour market. Moreover, as structural adjustment, privatisation and liberalisation took hold, the formal sector in most African countries appeared to be contracting rather than expanding and employers were very reluctant to invest in training in a hostile climate. Most college graduates were likely to find themselves working in micro and small enterprises, so it made apparent sense to focus their training more on this reality. Equally, there was a case for focusing also on the skills upgrading needs of those already in micro and small enterprises (MSEs).

Pre-self-employment training

A range of programmes were developed (with donor support) in the late-1980s and 1990s that sought to add a package of interventions onto the traditional college curriculum. These typically included skills in market analysis; general business skills and credit, as in the International Labour Office's (ILO) Skills Development for Self-Reliance model (Haan 1995). In some cases, such as the South African Technopreneur Project, there was also a business hive element to the project through which graduates were placed in subsidised and managed workshops adjacent to technical colleges, and were given mentoring (McGrath 1998b). In other cases, there were attempts to add elements of self-employment awareness into a range of curricular activities. At the minimalist end of the spectrum, the curriculum remained largely unchanged, except for the addition of the requirement that students should develop a business plan for setting up their own enterprise as part of their examination requirements, as in another ILO project in Kenya (McGrath 1998c).

However, the evidence from such programmes is less positive than was expected. Institutions have proved much harder to reorient than was expected. Often this is blamed on the unwillingness of management, staff and students to contemplate the shift in focus. However, this seems a misdirected criticism. What appears more serious is the room for manoeuvre of providers, given the wide, and often conflicting, range of expectations being placed on them when the whole range of VET transformation is considered (McGrath 2003a).

The second challenge is even less attributable to a failing of colleges. Whilst it is not impossible to become successfully self-employed on graduation, there is a far greater likelihood of successful self-employment when a series of factors are in place. These include better-developed skills, honed in the workplace; experience; networks; equipment; and capital. Becoming successfully self-employed is a process that typically takes several years (McGrath et al. 1995).

It is important here to be clear about what we mean about successful self-employment. Given the low levels of formal, wage employment in all African economies, including South Africa, it is inevitable that many college graduates will become self-employed in the short run. However, much of this self-employment will be low income and unrelated to their area of training. This is often termed subsistence or survivalist self-employment. What self-employment programmes are aiming at, however, is insertion of graduates into what is termed successful or sustainable self-employment. This is self-employment that builds meaningfully on past education and training and which provides an income that is often better than in wage employment. However, this is a segment of self-employment that is often filled by those with considerable experience of wage employment (McGrath et al. 1995).

MSE skills upgrading

Across the region, there is strong evidence of the need to improve the skills of those already in MSEs (King and McGrath 1999 and 2002). Inadequate theoretical grounding and rapid technological change have put increasing pressure on informal artisanal skills development. Securing sustainable livelihoods in the informal economy more and more seems to depend largely on the ability to locate enterprises in viable niches where competition is limited and customers are relatively wealthy, or are formal sector firms. Skills are an important element of the ability to add value and to access such niches (King and McGrath 2002).

There have been a number of programmes to support such skills upgrading across Africa, although many of the most developed have been in West Africa, where indigenous patterns

of skills development are also most advanced. Whilst there have been some successes, it is apparent that the relationship between public providers and MSEs is not straight-forward. Relationships with MSE associations need a lot of effort to develop and maintain. There is only limited time and money for MSE owners and workers to spend on extra training, and not all of them are sufficiently aware of their needs in this area. Some colleges have very successfully opened their facilities out-of-hours for MSEs to make use of specialist or costly equipment. However, for others, issues of transport and security are likely to make any similar outreach difficult to achieve (King and McGrath 2002).

Capacity and resourcing issues

Crouch, Finegold and Sako's comparative study of seven OECD countries points to very serious capacity limitations in national VET systems in wealthy countries (Crouch, Finegold and Sako 1999). It would be naïve not to expect similar, indeed more serious, problems in the SADC region.

They argue that VET is highly complex, faced as it is by rapidly changing technologies and labour market dynamics. Furthermore, VET sits at the highly contested crossroads between the economic and educational systems, with their conflicting institutional logics and ideological presuppositions. Moreover, VET is very costly, especially in a period of rapid technological change.

These problems are exacerbated when one takes stock of the sheer range and complexity of the changes being expected from VET systems, only some of which we have addressed in this paper.

In the face of this cost and complexity, state and employer funding have typically been very inadequate. In spite of rhetorical flourishes, VET has typically been a very small priority of the state relative to other foci, such as schooling, health or defence. VET systems have usually occupied the corners of larger government departments such as Education or Industry. They have also been dissipated across government departments. Employers internationally have often under-invested in training for reasons such as the "free rider problem" (Crouch, Finegold and Sako 1999). In the SADC region this is exacerbated by the relative weakness of the formal sector and overall economies in most countries. Learners and their families also lack the necessary incomes to contribute significantly to meeting the costs of training. Finally, as we noted above, donors have reduced their interest in VET to a very minor part of their overall activities in the region.

National human resources for addressing the enormity of the VET challenge are presently inadequate. This is not surprising in the light of the points made already about funding. The relevant government agencies and departments across the region typically are under-staffed. Few staff have a professional education in the VET field. This is related to and exacerbated by the paucity of capacity in the universities of the region to comment meaningfully on VET issues, which have been neglected by academics (McGrath 2000). The little research that does take place in most countries is likely to be donor-funded, overly-sensitive to donor thinking and poorly disseminated (McGrath 2001).

Donor capacities too are very weak (Danida 2002; WGICSD 2002). The declining importance of VET for even its traditional supporters such as Germany means that there will typically be very few VET specialists across the range of agencies that are present in a country. Moreover, the shift of aid towards partnership, donor coordination and sector (and multi-sector) programmes requires very different skills than those that have been common among chief technical advisors (Danida 2002; WGICSD 2002; King and McGrath 2003). Even at headquarters, the demographics of the typical agency mean that many of the remaining VET specialists are reaching retirement age, whilst the overall poverty focus

brings the danger that they will not be replaced. Even if they are, there will clearly be a major challenge of maintaining institutional memory.

Challenges of human resource capacity are made worse by the transformation of both aid and VET. Greater decentralisation of authority in agencies means that the system becomes ever more dependent on the quality of the staff in country. This can be of great benefit where a strong working relationship develops between donors and government, but this is by no means assured. On the national side, the massive growth of new institutions, such as national and sectoral training agencies and qualifications authorities brings a huge challenge of capacity building. Furthermore, decentralisation to provinces and to colleges in several countries also bring major capacity needs at these levels.

Adequate capacity will be essential to the development of the reformed VET systems of the region. However, the capacity issue remains inadequately addressed in most cases.

CONCLUSION

The scale of the transformation of VET being attempted across the SADC region needs to be clearly acknowledged. Whilst it is appropriate to congratulate governments and agencies for their vision and ambition, it is also vital to be realistic about the complexity and range of the challenges that remain, and the timescale over which reform needs to be grown.

We are strongly committed to the overall vision of VET systems that can better meet the needs and aspirations of learners, communities, enterprises and countries across the region. However, in our commitment to making that vision a reality we have sought to show here that vision is not enough. Experiences across the globe in VET reform raise a large number of serious challenges to SADC countries' aspirations. Our hope is that by foregrounding some of these challenges that we can assist policymakers in implementing their vision.

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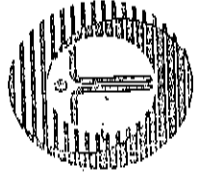llenges Facing VET Transformation

5 August 2003
Gaborone, Botswana

Simon McGrath & Salim Akoojee

Sciences Research Council

Challenges facing TVET Transformation in SADC Region

SADC Research Project

- Public colleges for local development
- Training for the informal economy & self employment
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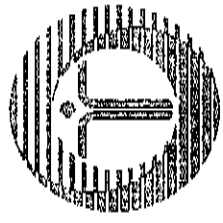
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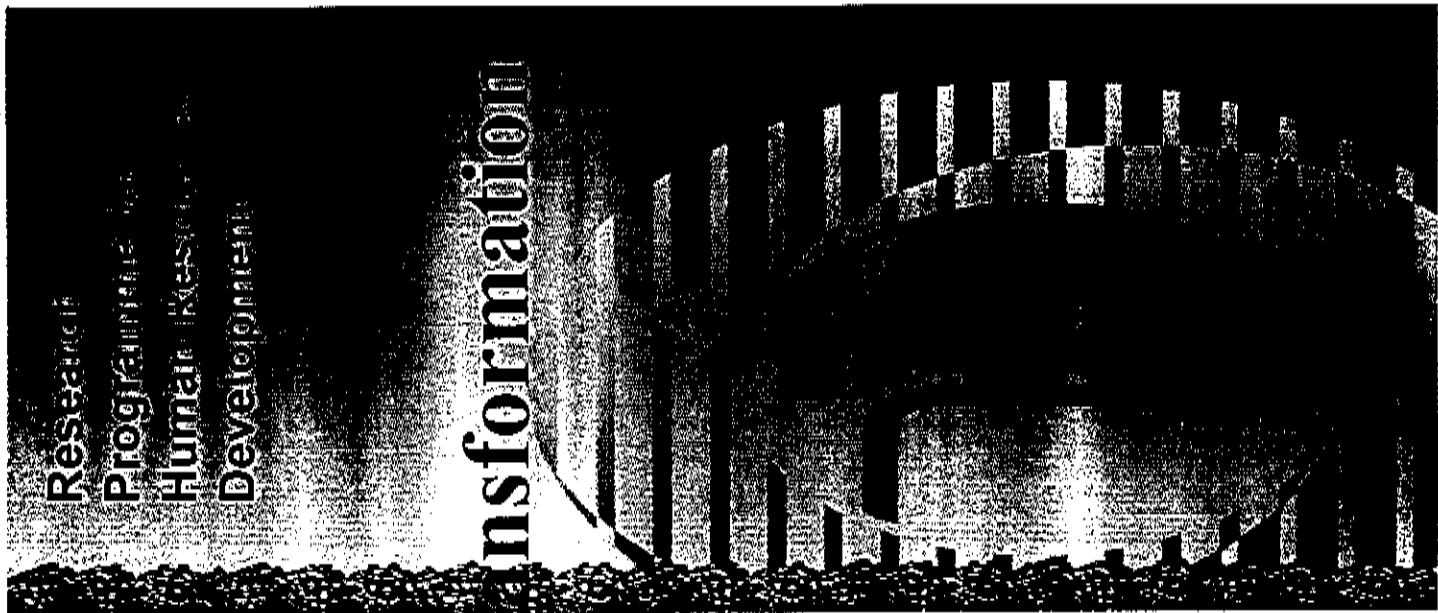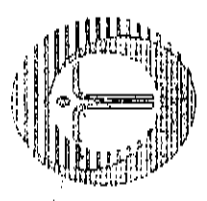# Challenges Facing VET Transformation

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