



Western Cape colleges form part of a wider initiative to get students working by closing the gap between employment and training

Editor's Note:

Shanita Roopnarain is a Project Manager for the Swiss South African Co-operation Initiative (SSACI). SSACI is a public-private partnership based in Johannesburg and has worked with colleges in developing a structured programme for Workplace Experience (WBE) for college students. The pilot stage ended last year and the project is now being rolled out by SSACI. College of Cape Town was one of four colleges involved in the pilot programme and now False Bay College, South Cape College and Boland College are amongst the fifteen new participant colleges involved.

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South Africa has the highest unemployment rate among 61 countries surveyed by Bloomberg (Fin24: Economy, May 24 2011). We are a country in crisis with a current unemployment rate of 25,9%. It is a desperate situation and getting worse with time.

We have maintained these levels of unemployment for more than a decade and this translates to more than 4 million people unemployed (Stats SA, 8 Feb 2011), heightened by a steady decline of capacity within industry to absorb this ever increasing pool. The question is why is there such a low intake of the labour force? Some of the reasons, according to Dr Haroon Borat (October 2010 in Washington DC)¹, lie in "a failing schooling system and further education and training system (FET)" as well as "a mismatch between labour demand and supply" and the issue of addressing the crisis, he suggests, could be through "improving employment placements by focusing on unemployed youth and unemployed adults" and "focusing on labour regulations".

However, the future looks grim when one considers that more than 51% of SA's youth is unemployed (Survey: SA Institute of race relations as of 28 July 2011). This scenario has been here a while and is increasing. There is no doubt that South Africa's

unemployment time bomb is alarming!

The Swiss South African Cooperation Initiative (SSACI) based in Johannesburg is a public-private partnership between the Swiss government and a group of Swiss companies operating in South Africa. It has reviewed the unemployment crisis and in an effort to assist with alleviating this situation, SSACI has introduced Workplace-Based Experience (WBE) to FET college students on the National Certificate (Vocational) [NC(V)] programme. The intention of WBE is to align the NC (V) curriculum closer to the needs of industry and in so doing begin to develop a long term cooperation between colleges and companies. In other words, students will continue learning both in the workplace and in the classroom and the placements give the students a valuable contextual foundation for the job that they will do when they eventually are employed. This is also a way to encourage colleges and companies to talk to each other and improve student employability in the long term. From SSACI's experience, one of the key benefits for the companies, amongst many others, is the development and identification of future employees by companies either for themselves or for industry in general.

The aim of the project is to prepare the student for the workplace so that s/he is more employable and understands the industry needs once

they have completed the FET course. In this way, the companies benefit as they are able to identify potential employees and contribute to the curriculum development by noting what the students lack when they are in the workplace and making concrete inputs. Through this exposure, students understand the needs of industry much better and they are able to translate theory into practical application.

In the pilot study (2008 -2010) several students from Engineering NC (V) programmes spent their holidays finding out what the workplace was all about. For both the students and the lecturers this was a new approach to implementing the NC (V) curriculum. Companies were already experienced in providing various types of WBE through apprenticeships, university internships and learnerships. Unless students came through the indentured route to colleges, students of the Report 191 programme and the NC (V) programme had no link to industry. Through the WBE programme, students were delighted that they got the opportunity to experience what it was like to be in a real company. One of the students said after visiting the company, "The equipment we learn about in theory class is not available in the college workshop, but I used them in the industry and this has made me understand my theory better". Level 2 learner².

The new curriculum has caused some concern for industry as there were some serious consequences for industry in terms of artisanship and requirements for trade testing. Phasing out the N2 left a legislative gap for trade test requirements and therefore a scornful reaction to the NC (V). However, the SSACI project was able to change perceptions for the better, and a lecturer had this to say "Employers were initially very negative and, from last year, we started engaging with employers and maybe this is an area

we slipped up on by not placing enough emphasis on this. We have had a few breakfast meetings and a few bi-laterals and now they understand the need for relationship building with the FET Colleges as they are seeing the benefits of the NCV"³.

Learners state that this lack of understanding causes them a real sense of frustration, as, in the absence of this recognition from industry; they are unable to find employment. One learner observed: "I do not think the companies realise the potential of the NCV because it is not good to learn for three years and at the end you do not get a job. I think the companies must recognise the NCV because the learners who finish NCV have practical and theoretical experience"⁴.

A number of employers state that having hosted the learners they were generally impressed with the quality, and some stated that they hoped to employ some of the learners when they complete their courses. They suggest that this is an important indication that the project has begun to meet its objectives.

25 colleges countrywide have been supported by SSACI to implement WBE. There are four participating colleges in the Western Cape. They are the College of Cape Town, Boland College, False Bay College and South Cape College. SSACI in partnership with the DHET plans to roll out WBE to the remaining 25 colleges by 2012 so that all FET College NC (V) learners can benefit from the project. SSACI is certain that if relationships between colleges and companies improve, and more companies begin to open their doors to students, there will be greater impact overall for improving employment in South Africa.

For further information on this project contact the Swiss South African Co-operation Initiative (SSACI) by emailing the author at shanita@ssaci.org.za.

Footnotes

¹ Haroon Borat is a Professor in the School of Economics and Development, Policy Research Unit, University of Cape Town. He presented the topic: "Unemployment in South Africa, Descriptors and Determinants" to the Commission on Growth and development, World Bank, in Washington DC on 15 October 2010.

² Response from a Level 2 learner participating Singizi Consulting evaluation of SSACI's FET College Project.

³ Response from a senior lecturer at an FET College participating in the Singizi Consulting evaluation of the FET project.

⁴ Response from a Level 2 learner participating in Singizi Consulting evaluation of SSACI's FET Project.