

*Workplace Based Experience for Students at Further Education and Training Colleges:
Experiences of the Swiss South African Co-Operation Initiative (SSACI) in South Africa*

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Access to high quality, relevant education and training strongly influences the chances young people have in their lives. In South Africa it is estimated that more than half of the population of 50 Million (2010: 52%) is under the age of 25¹. Based on the share that young people have in the overall population it is clear that youth matters in South Africa.

In 2010 approximately 1.6 Million students were enrolled in South African Universities and Further Education and Training Colleges (FET Colleges) while twice as many young people (3.2 Million) belonged to the so called NEETs – Not in Education, Employment or Training². The future looks grim when one considers that more than 51% of SA's youth is unemployed³. This scenario has not improved significantly in the last couple of years. There is no doubt that South Africa's unemployment numbers are alarming!

One of the causes of youth unemployment that has been identified on the supply-side of the labour market is a lack of appropriate skills and work related capabilities including a lack of prior work experience⁴. Although the Further Education and Training sector has undergone several transformation cycles post 1994, a mechanism for FET College students to gain relevant workplace experience has – with some exceptions – not yet been established⁵.

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. SSACI has reviewed the youth unemployment crisis and in an effort to assist with alleviating this situation SSACI focuses on strengthening the interface between the FET College sector and industry by introducing workplace experience for (1) students currently enrolled in FET Colleges as well as for (2) college graduates.

- (1) SSACI has introduced Workplace-Based Experience (WBE) to FET college students on the National Certificate Vocational [NC (V)] programme in a pilot project initiated in 2008. The intention of WBE is to develop long term cooperation between colleges and companies and in so doing to improve the delivery of the NC (V) program according to the needs of industry. In other words, students learn both in the workplace and in the classroom. During short, on-course placements (1-3 weeks) students observe and experience the world of work and

¹ Perold, Cloete & Papier (2012) Shaping the Future of South Africa's Youth: Rethinking post-school education and skills training, Somerset West.

² Perold, Cloete & Papier (2012) Shaping the Future of South Africa's Youth: Rethinking post-school education and skills training, Somerset West.

³ Percentage for 15-to 24-year olds; Survey conducted by the SA Institute of Race Relations as of 28 July 2011

⁴ Smith, Judy-Marié (2011) Connecting Young South Africans to Opportunity: Literature Review and Strategy.

⁵ See chapter 4.2.5 of the Green Paper for Post-School Education and Training of the Department of Higher Education and Training (2012).

acquire a valuable contextual foundation. This is a way to encourage FET Colleges and companies to talk to each other and to improve student employability in the long term.

Since its start in 2008, 47 out of 50 colleges countrywide have been supported by SSACI to initiate the implementation of WBE. In partnership with the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) SSACI plans to roll out WBE to the remaining 3 colleges in 2012 so that all FET College NC (V) learners can benefit from workplace experiential learning.

- (2) The Graduate Internship Project (GIP), a pilot project that was initiated in 2011, enhances the practical training of FET College graduates and gives them an extended period of work experience. Graduates are placed for a six month internship with companies giving them the opportunity to demonstrate applied technical skills and key personal characteristics such as diligence, personal initiative and reliability. Employers enhance the interns' practical skills according to a logbook that defines core tasks of a trade. Companies that are satisfied with their interns during the six months period, subsequently take them onto an externally funded Accelerated Artisan Training Program to develop their skills up to trade test level. The project functions as a bridge between college and industry. It opens up a new pathway for students by enabling them to follow the artisan training route. It also contributes to fulfilling industry's increasing demand for artisans.

The first phase of the GIP project was conceptualized and piloted with 51 students in 2011 and 2012 and a second phase with a slightly adapted model, leading to the accelerated artisan training programme which starts at the end of 2012 with up to 200 FET college graduates. The second phase is based on systemic public funding, meaning that the model will set up the mechanism for future interns to be funded by Sector Education Training Authorities (SETA's) which are the public sector training arm of the government.

Lessons Learnt

- I. While companies were initially very reluctant to receive learners from the NCV programme as they were unsure about the curriculum as well as the practical skills of the students, both projects influenced employers' perspective on the capabilities of the students in a very positive way.
- II. One of the key benefits for companies participating in the projects was the development and identification of future employees. Some of the companies who received students for WBE traced them through the three years at the college and were able to reduce costly recruitment processes when employing NCV graduates afterwards.
- III. Colleges as well as employers began to realize that College-Industry partnerships are necessary for meaningful education and training. As one of the lecturers said: "Employers were initially very negative and, from last year, we started engaging with employers and maybe this is an area we slipped upon 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".
- IV. 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". The project also had a positive effect on the motivation of students. NCV students showed better attitudes in the classroom and subject pass-rates improved. According to several lecturers, this was due to the fact that students were making an effort to meet the criteria to be placed in the workplace.

- V. Although the two projects had a case study character, both indicate that workplace-experience highly increases the employability of students. Most of the employers were keen to absorb graduates for artisan training (apprenticeship) after they successfully completed a six month internships with a company.

What will be the long-term impact of the two projects? The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) has chosen Workplace Based Experience for students to become one of the four key performance indicators for each of the 50 FET colleges in South Africa. SSACI has furthermore been nominated by the Department to develop a framework for WBE for the FET sector. The second project (GIP) is starting its second phase, involving a larger group of students, a slightly revised model as well as systemic public funding.

SSACI is certain that if relationships between colleges and companies improve, and more companies begin to open their doors to students, this will have a positive effect on the employability of FET College students in South Africa. As steps to improve the supply side of the labour market have been initiated, a major challenge remains on the demand side. Can industry provide enough jobs for all the young people in South Africa?

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