



TRAINING SOUTH AFRICAN YOUTHS FOR EMPLOYMENT



Swiss-South African Cooperation Initiative

Lessons from SSACI's Experience

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Since 2001, the **Swiss-South African Cooperation Initiative (SSACI)** has provided financial and technical support to a wide range of vocational training projects for unskilled, unemployed young South Africans from disadvantaged backgrounds. The main aim of these projects is to prepare the trainees for skilled employment.

By July 2009, almost 5'000 youths had been enrolled for training in 50 projects, with a pass rate of over 90% and a post-training, long-term employment rate of over 70% in quality jobs paying a decent wage.

This booklet summarises the lessons that SSACI has learned from this practical experience of skills training for employment. It offers examples of good practice in the design and implementation of vocational training that leads to enhanced employability and successful labour-market outcomes. These insights may feed into the ongoing discussion about how to help young people make the critical transition from school to work.



THE SKILLS-FOR-EMPLOYMENT PROBLEM

Internationally, labour markets have been unable to keep up with population growth and the influx of large numbers of young, first-time entrants. As a result, the unemployment rate for young people is typically twice as high as that for the general population. South Africa is no exception. Official statistics put unemployment amongst the economically-active population as a whole at around 25% and at over 50% for people aged 16-35. Much of the pressure on the South African labour market comes from young African entrants, who experience the highest rate of unemployment of all population groups.

There are two main reasons for the high rate of unemployment amongst South African youths:

1. **The supply of jobs is not keeping pace with the demand.** Between 1996 and 2004, for example, the number of jobs in South Africa increased by about two-and-a-half million while the number of job-seekers increased by over five million. Effectively, then, unemployment went up by over two million. The brunt of this shortfall in jobs naturally fell upon first-time entrants into the labour market, i.e. young people.
2. **Most young South Africans lack marketable skills.** This is illustrated by the fact that, amidst massive unemployment, hundreds of thousands of jobs lie vacant because suitably qualified workers cannot be found to fill them.

Although completing secondary school improves employment prospects for youths from other population groups, it does not necessarily do so for Africans. This reflects the mismatch between the skills sought by employers and those brought by African school-leavers, who have not usually had much career guidance, any occupational or vocational training, or substantial tuition in subjects highly prized by employers, such as mathematics and science. There is also a widespread perception amongst employers that educational institutions serving mainly African communities have low standards.¹

Many non-government organizations (NGOs) and private agencies attempt to make youths more employable through interventions such as life-skills training, career guidance, exposure to the workplace and matching job-seekers with potential employers. However there is little evidence that they get many young people into stable employment.² Worryingly, then, the number of unemployed young South Africans is increasing relentlessly, creating a growing underclass of perpetually poor, unemployed, disaffected youth. At the same time, scarce resources intended to help them are being used to little effect. Such a situation is both socially and economically unsustainable.



¹ Borat & Oosthuizen, 2006
² Marock & Gewer, 2008

WHY IS IT HARDER FOR YOUNG PEOPLE TO FIND AND KEEP JOBS?

Young people everywhere find it harder to get and keep jobs because:

- They have fewer technical skills and less work experience than older people, which makes them less attractive to prospective employers
- Their social and linguistic skills are less developed, especially in unfamiliar situations like job interviews and assessments
- They are less experienced at all aspects of job-hunting
- They have fewer business contacts and social relationships that can be put to use in finding employment opportunities
- As newcomers, they are the first to go when retrenchments are made on the “last-in-first-out” principle
- As lower earners, they are also cheaper to retrench

In South Africa, these problems are compounded for many young African school-leavers by the fact that they come from families with low levels of education and high levels of unemployment and exclusion from the formal economy. They are often ‘second or third generation unemployed’ who find the job market a daunting and discouraging place.

SSACI’S EXPERIENCE

SSACI has been involved in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) since 2001. By July 2009, it had enrolled almost 5’000 youths for training in 50 projects, with a pass rate of over 90% and a post-training, long-term employment rate of over 70%.

SSACI’s programme was reviewed by independent, external researchers in 2004³ and 2005⁴. Both reports were overwhelmingly favourable. The 2004 report described a central tenet of SSACI’s TVET programme as follows:⁵

Comparative advantages of SSACI projects: bridges across the transfer gap

The effectiveness of rapid workplace related training is determined to a large extent by transfer into practice, i.e. that the trainee is enabled to apply acquired skills without getting further support. Therefore, a core task of training involves bridging the gap between the learning that takes place during training and the practical application of what has been learned. Since SSACI seeks to get youths into sustainable long-term employment, its projects strive to bridge the gap between training and the workplace. Without claiming completeness, those projects try to:

- develop learning activities that match the real work situation, involving a high proportion of practical skills development through exercises, problem-solving activities and case studies
- promote all forms of practice-orientated learning based on the assessment of required competencies, practical exercises, in-service learnerships, and practicals in enterprises
- integrate life skills training, entrepreneurial training and assistance in establishing micro-enterprises into technical skills training
- provide in every project post-training mentorship to facilitate finding jobs or setting up micro-enterprises

³ Zimmermann et al, 2004

⁴ Schmidt & Mlotchwa, 2005

⁵ Zimmermann et al, op cit, p23

Another external review in the first half of 2009 confirmed that bridging the transfer gap between training and the workplace continued to be central to SSACI's skills-development programme⁶. As with previous research, the methodology involved:

- a tracer study of former trainees chosen at random from past and present TVET projects
- focus-group interviews with trainees from current projects
- interviews with training providers in current projects
- interviews with current employers of SSACI graduates
- visits to training courses

The researchers reported that SSACI's TVET training programme was characterised by:

- **Effective outreach to unskilled, unemployed, youths from disadvantaged backgrounds:**
"SSACI is reaching the target population it is mandated to work with"
- **High levels of satisfaction with the quality of the programme amongst trainees and employers.**
"98% of the learners rated the quality of classroom teaching as good or very good... 78% of the learners stated that they have been given good opportunity to practice new skills... Critically, 80% of the employers interviewed viewed the preparedness of trainees to enter the workplace as 'above average' or 'excellent'... Further, 74% of employers stated that the life-skills of the graduates were of an 'above average' or 'excellent' level."
- **Good access to opportunities to practise newly-acquired technical skills through internships and workplace-based training:**
"The value of ensuring linkages between institutional learning, practical training and the workplace is clearly demonstrated in the [project] case studies."
- **Good preparation for the world of work:**
"77% of graduates reported that the work opportunity that they have accessed is related to the qualification that they attained through the programme supported by SSACI. Learners spoke enthusiastically about the extent to which they were able to utilise their technical skills in the workplace... It was found that the majority of [trainees now in jobs] are able to apply their skills as a central component of their occupations, and that even those who do not work in areas directly related to their training are finding ways to utilise their skills... Of even more import is that 80% of the employers interviewed stated that the preparedness of graduates to enter the workplace was 'above average' or 'excellent' "
- **Development of social networks that give access to employment opportunities:**
"Students supported by SSACI are unlikely to have the type of social network emphasised by the research literature as being critical for accessing employment. Yet the programmes appear to have successfully focused on the development of such networks for the students... In addition, many of the employer interviews reflect on the fact that the placements provided them with an opportunity to determine whether there was a fit between their needs and the competence and attitude of the learners. A number of employers indicated that they had selected the individual for employment based on this experience. This again emphasises the importance of the placements for creating networks for the learner."
- **High levels of job placement**, on completion of training, in employment related to the graduates' newly acquired skills.
"It appears that these jobs are quality jobs and that the majority relate directly to the qualifications completed though the SSACI programme. "

The researchers concluded that SSACI's practice is worthy of being fed into national programmes.

⁶ Singizi, 2009

KEY ELEMENTS OF SUCCESSFUL TVET

From a review of the international research literature and reflection on eight years of practical experience, SSACI has identified the following elements as being essential to the success of technical and vocational education and training (TVET) aimed at out-of-school youths:

1. Focus on Demand and Opportunity

Not all jobs are suitable for, or accessible to, young people. Some require specialized knowledge and skills that can only be gained from years of experience. Others, such as domestic service, offer few opportunities for career advancement or personal development.

Programmes and initiatives that seek to train young people for employment should target jobs and career paths that offer good prospects for long-term employment, promotion, the acquisition of further skills and personal growth. This, in turn, means that TVET provision for youths should be focused on sectors of the economy that:

- **Are growing**, and are therefore likely to offer future opportunities for personal and career development
- **Are creating new jobs and work opportunities**, as opposed to the “jobless growth” found in some industries
- **Require low-to-intermediate entry-levels of skill** and therefore offer the sort of jobs that young people can immediately fill

Industries that meet these criteria change over time, so it is essential for the programme-provider to stay well informed about what and where they are, and what skills they are looking for.



ALIGNING SKILLS TRAINING WITH DEMAND

Amongst SSACI's largest and most successful TVET projects were those targeting:

- engineering trades experiencing critical skills shortages, such as boilermaking, millwrighting and fitting-and-turning
- the hospitality industry in the run-up to the 2010 Football World Cup
- rural health services, where there is a chronic shortage of qualified personnel for posts in public hospitals and clinics

Youths trained in these fields benefited from the high demand for skilled workers, often being offered employment immediately on completion of training.

2. The Right Skills at the Right Cost

It stands to reason that training aimed at getting young people into employment must result in a level of technical skill commensurate with the work envisaged. A surprising number of programmes and courses seem to overlook this basic principle, gearing their training to the on-paper requirements of a national curriculum or qualifications framework rather than to the practical demands of the workplace. But training can only lead to employment if it is clearly fit-for-purpose and therefore has credibility with industry. The learning outcomes must closely match the knowledge, skills and abilities required to do the actual work. On the other hand, it is a mistake to restrict the target outcomes to the minimum level of practical skill required by a particular job. Training that is 'narrow and shallow' stunts both the trainee's capacity for future career development and the employer's capacity for improving processes or products. At the same time, the cost of training must not be so high as to threaten the future sustainability of the programme.



'MATCHING PEGS TO HOLES'

When SSACI launched a training project in the commercial poultry farming industry in 2004, there was a mismatch between the number of training-credits recognised by the parastatal Agricultural Sector Education and Training Authority as an entry-level qualification for the industry (120), the number of credits considered necessary by employers (138) and the number offered by the chosen service-provider (233). Over the next four years, SSACI helped to research and pilot an optimum combination of credits that would satisfy the demands of industry and provide the trainees with a foundation for life-long learning without exceeding the qualifying parameters for public funding.

3. Careful Selection of Trainees

Taking all comers leads to a high failure rate amongst trainees and a waste of precious resources. To avoid this, specifications for suitable trainees need to be worked out in advance and a valid and reliable selection process put in place to ensure that everyone who is enrolled has the potential to succeed.

Trainees should also feel from the start that here is work they would like to do and that their training is equipping them for it. Similarly, prospective employers should readily be able to see in the new graduates the attributes that are needed first to get a job and then to get ahead in this industry.



IDENTIFYING THE RIGHT TRAINEES

SSACI training programmes typically feature an aptitude test and individual interview as part of the selection process. Many also include a practical activity, such as:

- Researching an aspect of the job or industry the trainee will enter
- Finding an employer willing to take them on for a short internship during or after their training
- Taking a tour of a typical workplace and then being debriefed about observations and impressions
- Doing a simple task related to the work ahead

4. Careful Selection of Training Providers

That training service-providers should have extensive expertise in the relevant areas of technical skill is obvious. Less obvious, but equally important, is that they must also have the willingness and capacity to adjust their training programmes to the needs of young, first-time entrants – especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Substantial adjustments may be required to the content or methodology of the curriculum, the timing and duration of the training, and the level of academic support and personal guidance offered to trainees. Not all training providers can, or want to, make such adjustments. Young people with little prior experience of practical skills training or the world of work should not be entrusted to such trainers. It simply results in the trainees being plunged into situations with which they cannot cope.

5. The Right Mix of Programme Elements

Effective skills training for employment, especially for young people, requires more than a strong technical skills component and good input in the classroom. Other essential ingredients are:

- **A balance between theory and practice:**

Good training programmes find creative ways of enabling trainees to practise newly-acquired skills, such as through a combination of simulated work and a supervised, supported internship with a host-employer prior to entering the competitive job market.

INCORPORATING PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE INTO TRAINING

SSACI seeks to integrate authentic work experience into its training programmes. For example:

- Trainee early childhood development (ECD) practitioners worked one day a week in local ECD centres throughout their ten-month course. They also undertook four two-week blocks of practical experience in “best practice” centres. In-service practitioners with whom the trainees worked shared in the assessment of the trainees’ practical work.
- Training in the Hospitality Skills for 2010 project included a three-month internship in a 3- or 4-star hotel, during which the interns were rotated through all the departments of a commercial hotel.



- **Life skills and personal support:**

While getting a job usually depends upon having the right technical or vocational skills, keeping a job often depends as much on having the right mix of personal and social competences – often referred to as “soft” skills. Experience around the world has shown the importance of “soft” life-skills to career success. These competences cannot be taken for granted in school-leavers, especially in South Africa where many youths grow up in families that have little experience of the world of work and attend schools that provide almost no personal or career guidance. How far any vocational skills training programme can and should go in providing personal support to learners is open to debate. There will always be time and cost limitations. Nevertheless, the available evidence suggests that an additional investment in life skills and personal support for the trainees brings substantial dividends in the form of a higher pass rate, improved employment rate and longer job-retention.

ADDING VALUE THROUGH LIFE-SKILLS

All SSACI-funded vocational training projects offer life skills and some personal support to trainees. Research indicates that this is a crucial element in the success of the training. The exact mix of skills and mode of delivery varies from project to project according to the perceived needs of the trainees, but typically comprises employability (including the work ethic, job-hunting, preparing for interviews and being interviewed), self-management (including goal setting, decision-making, problem-solving, adaptability and personal responsibility), personal health and safety (including HIV/AIDS awareness), and interpersonal relations (including communication, tolerance and managing conflict). These skills may be presented in discrete modules or integrated into the overall curriculum. Trainees may receive regular visits from a supportive advisor or have access to a counselling ‘hotline’.



- **Facilitating access to employment:**

Regardless of how technically competent they may be, youths everywhere find it difficult to access jobs. Their lack of specific work experience, unfamiliarity with the challenges of job-hunting and unease in socially challenging situations such as interviews are all serious obstacles to getting into that all-important first job. For a skills training programme really to lead to employment, it must introduce trainees to potential employers and prepare them for the selection process, which may include interviews, assessment tasks and oral or written presentations.



GETTING YOUTHS “INTO THE GAME”

Trainees in SSACI projects are assisted to find employment on completion of training. This assistance usually takes the form of:

- Help in preparing a personal C.V.
- Showing trainees how to identify potential employers from job adverts, web-searches and labour brokers, exchanges and employment centres
- Setting up job interviews
- Preparing the trainee for the interview (e.g. advice on dress, grooming and personal presentation)

6. Development of Social Networks

Recent research has emphasised how important social networks are to accessing employment, and how disadvantaged young people are in this regard.⁷ For this reason, skills training projects aimed at youths should seek to develop these networks by such means as:

- Placing the trainees in periods of work experience with different host-employers
- Bringing in potential employers to meet trainees during the course (Award ceremonies, “open days”, guest speaking and sharing the latest news from industry are ideal opportunities for this)
- Enrolling trainees (usually on graduation) with professional bodies and associations
- Hosting an alumni club (which may be web-based)
- Showing trainees how to use online social networks catering to specific businesses or professions

7. Industry Partnerships

For training to lead to employment, it must address the skills needs of industry. This means that the initiators and providers of the training must be attuned to what the current needs are. On the other hand, if training focuses only on immediate demand, it may become too narrow and shallow to serve as a foundation for the trainee’s future development and career advancement. Thus, industry must be persuaded to value multiple elements in a training programme and to respect its broader educational underpinnings. On this basis, a highly successful partnership can be developed between industry and training provider, characterized by:

- a shared vision and common objectives, e.g. a sufficient supply of skilled and reliable workers who have the potential for future up-skilling or re-skilling as the needs of the company and the nature of their work change
- joint investment and implementation, e.g. foundational, theoretical and some practical training in an educational institution and supervised workplace-based experience in the company
- evaluation in terms of the common objectives, such as the number of youths trained and employed, rather than in terms of organisational self-interest, such as how many fees were collected by the training agency or how little money the employer had to spend on training.



⁷ See, for example, Marock & Gewer, 2008

BRINGING INDUSTRY ON BOARD

SSACI works with a range of training providers, including private firms, NGOs, universities and public colleges, selected for their track record in training youths for employment (measured by actual placement in jobs), their readiness to review and modify the curricula and their links to the industry for which they provide training. For instance:

- Artisan training was jointly implemented with the Steel & Engineering Industries Federation of South Africa, which took responsibility for quality-assuring the training and linking trainees to host-employers
- Training in poultry farming was done through a university-based training and research institute partly funded by the South African Poultry Association, an industry body.

These links to industry have been crucial to ensuring that training meets the current skills-needs of employers, and also to sensitizing those employers to the challenges facing first-time entrants and how the employer can mitigate them.

8. External Support

TVET programmes and service-providers can benefit enormously from having an external support partner that helps to:

- Initiate new projects
- Mobilise resources
- Facilitate relationships with industry
- Encourage reflection on current practice and possible improvements
- Monitor, evaluate and back-stop implementation

Few training organisations or project implementers have the time or capacity to do all these things themselves. A 'critical friend' who takes on, or acts as a catalyst for, some of these functions renders invaluable assistance to the quality and sustainability of the programme. This role is often filled by a development agency, professional association, industry body or non-governmental organisation. Its value should not be underestimated.

HELPING 'WHENEVER AND WHEREVER'

Apart from financial and managerial inputs, SSACI's support for its projects has included:

- Helping public Further Education and Training colleges establish links with local companies that led to opportunities for lecturers and students to undergo periods of workplace-based training and development, as well as donations of machinery to under-equipped college workshops
- Developing logbooks for trainees on workplace-based experience and observation schedules for their supervisors, to help monitor and assess their progress
- Developing operational capacity within the partner organisations through in-service staff training and mentoring
- Hosting workshops, seminars and conferences for TVET agencies where experiences were shared, problems aired and best practices identified
- Researching and piloting new qualifications and training courses in fields such as agriculture, early childhood development, tourism, hospitality, customer contact-centres and construction

SUMMARY OF BEST PRACTICES

Internationally, there is growing recognition that technical and vocational skills training for employment – especially in programmes aimed at disadvantaged or marginalised youths – needs greater attention to relevance, value, efficiency and effectiveness than it has hitherto been given.

SSACI has had some success in this field and its experience reinforces the growing body of research evidence from South Africa and elsewhere that the most successful TVET for employment programmes are characterised, amongst other things, by:

- Ongoing research into where work opportunities suitable for young people are to be found, and training aimed specifically at providing access to those opportunities
- Rigorous selection of trainees, informed by a sound understanding of the desired outcome-competences, the required entry criteria and the normal capabilities of the target population
- An equally rigorous selection of training service-providers on the basis of their track record in training youths for employment and their readiness to reflect upon and modify their curriculum and mode of delivery in the light of research and experience
- A curriculum that develops the technical and life skills necessary to get and retain employment in the target industry, and to provide a foundation for future learning, self-development and career advancement
- A period of structured and supported practical experience in an authentic workplace
- A level of academic and personal support for trainees that strikes a reasonable balance between comprehensiveness and affordability
- Extension of the trainees' social networks to bring them into contact with, and attune them to the culture of, prospective employers
- Assistance in identifying employment opportunities and preparing for the employers' selection processes
- Establishment of strong, mutually-beneficial partnerships between training providers, industry and other agencies and stakeholders that can add value to the programme
- Internal evaluation processes that promote ongoing reflection and continuous improvement of the programme

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Acknowledgments

SSACI's Skills Training for Employment Programme has been sponsored by:

ABB

AfriSam

Bühler

Ciba

Clariant

Credit Suisse

Hilti

Holcim

Novartis Foundation for People and the Environment

Schindler

Stanley Thomas Johnson Foundation

Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)

Swiss International Air Lines

Swiss Re

UBS Optimus Foundation

Design & layout: The J Factor Creative Design , PO Box 7821, Palm Court, 1715

All photos from the SSACI collection

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