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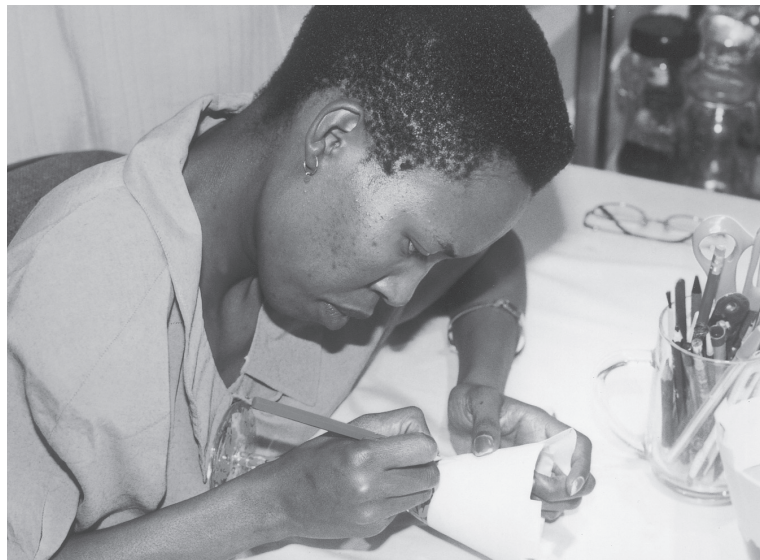
# Muddling through

## A look at the national skills development strategy

*Skills development and the birth of our National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS) promised to deliver opportunities for the disadvantaged and impoverished by allowing them the opportunity to leap the gap between the masses of unskilled 'cheap' labourers and skilled and semi-skilled jobs. **Fedusa** looks at whether this is indeed happening.*

**T**he establishment of the National Skills Authority (NSA) and the various Sectoral Education and Training Authorities (Setas) was meant to give direction to, and provide a sturdy framework for the implementation of the NSDS and the administration of the funds which were collected through skills levies. However, the NSA has been turned into a toothless watchdog pushed aside and disregarded by the Minister of Labour. An ongoing power struggle between the Department of Labour (DoL) and the Department of Education (DoE) as to who has the ultimate jurisdiction over training and just about every other aspect of skills development, has also led to a loss of focus.

The Skills Development Act clearly defines the role of the NSA as advisory body to the Minister of Labour and investigative watchdog to the Setas, yet the minister has never met with the NSA and has chosen to make decisions and recommendations which exclude



the input of stakeholders represented on the NSA. Furthermore, the NSA has never been afforded the opportunity to conduct any investigations into incidents of mismanagement as laid out in the Skills Act. The current

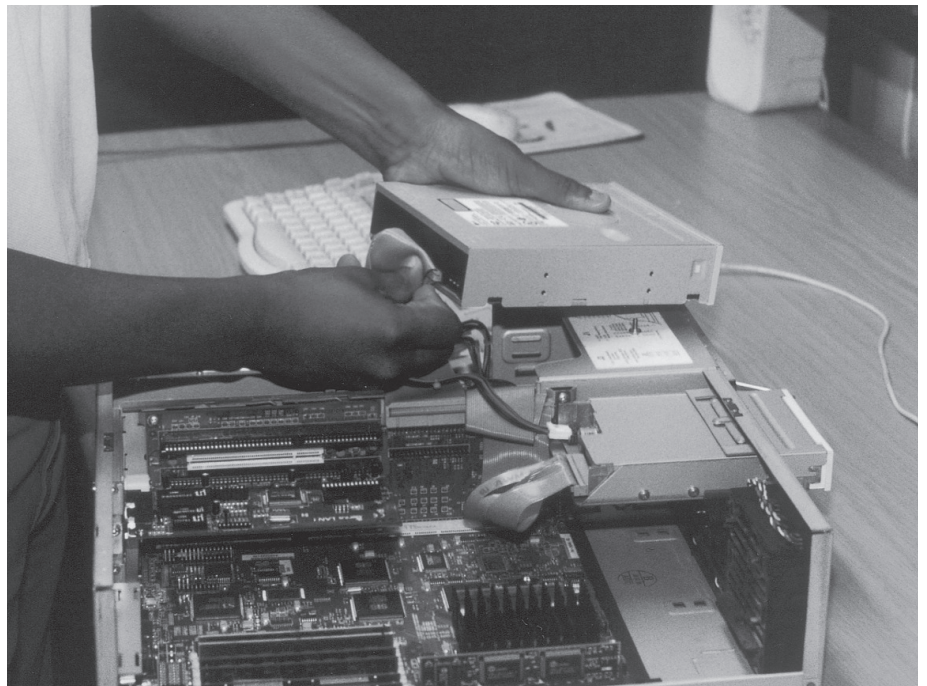
situation is that the Department of Labour deals with investigations and undertakes prosecution of parties with the exclusion of the NSA.

In order to be able to make sound recommendations to the minister on

any case, the NSA would need to have access to audited reports outlining how much money is currently in the skills fund, documentation which is not being made available. Instead, when requested to provide these audited statements, the accounting officer of the Skills Fund, the Director-General of Labour, chose to provide a general presentation of income and expenditure. Without the tools to function effectively and without the support and cooperation of the Department of Labour, the NSA and the DoL can make no coordinated efforts to rectify the problems within the Setas and ensure the skills development and learnership targets are met.

Looking at the Setas it is clear that some are functioning efficiently and effectively and others have serious problems. Mismanagement appears, hopefully, to be a thing of the past, but some Setas are severely under-funded when it comes to their administrative capacity. Add the fact that accessing learnerships has to a large extent been squarely placed in the hands of the person on the street, who at the best of times would not understand the jargon or the process, and you begin to understand why with little more than 18 months to go until the end of the current NSDS, the Setas are nowhere near meeting their learnership targets.

What can be done? Firstly the whole matter of skills development needs to be depoliticised. There simply is no room for power struggles between government departments and/or the NSA. The time has come for all stakeholders to roll up their sleeves and get to work on making a significant dent in the backlog of learnerships. The concerns of the Setas need to be addressed and the accessibility and make-up of information on the NSDS and learnerships available to the public,



rethought. Rural workers for instance, are being severely neglected by the current modus operandi.

The skills levy will continue to be an integral part of the NSDS. This is despite whispers that some parties would like to see it scrapped. There is no better way of ensuring the funding is available and set aside for skills development within our society and encouraging employers to invest in their employees while ensuring they comply with the Act.

An area that needs to receive more attention in the next NSDS, set to begin in 2005 is the content of workplace skills plans submitted by employers. Criteria, including the participation of skills development committees from the conceptual phase of the plan and quality assurance mechanisms being set in place which ensure accredited training takes place, should be set for workplace skills plans submitted by

employers. In addition, initial grants should be dependent upon employers having provided ABET and HIV/AIDS training within their organisations. Employers meeting employment equity targets could also be offered higher grants as an incentive. HIV/AIDS is destined to have a major impact on the availability of skills in the future, and this will have to be factored into the structuring of the new revised NSDS.

It is also key that government departments commit to greater participation in the strategy as they can significantly contribute to the achievement of learnership targets by employing learners within their structures on a wide scale.

The biggest challenge facing us all of course is, should the NSDS be successful in achieving its goals, will our economy be able to provide the learners with the tool they need most of all – jobs.

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