

# Occupational education and training

## Challenging ‘head/hand’ divide

In the workplace there is a divide between those who manage and make decisions and those who do the practical work and our education and training system reflects this. **Adrienne Bird** comes up with some ideas on how the ‘head/hand’ split can be broken down which would give working people a much broader range of skills, opportunities and control.

**T**his is an exciting time. With the establishment of a single Department for Higher Education and Training comes an opportunity to challenge the ‘head/hand’ division that characterises work in most workplaces.

### ‘HEAD/HAND’ DIVIDE

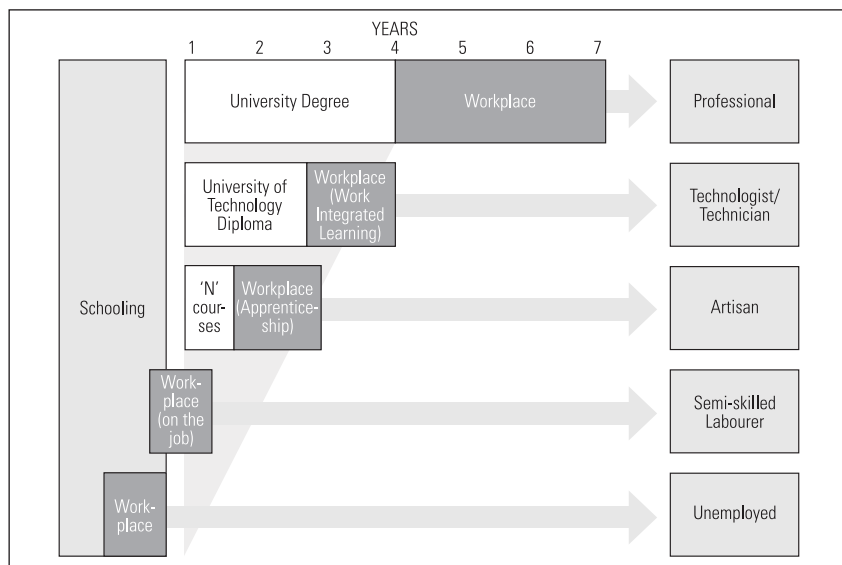
In most workplaces there are the ‘heads’ that make all the key decisions and the ‘hands’ that carry out the instructions of the ‘heads’. The ‘heads’ form the professional, para-professional and managerial corps who carry out the work of the owners on site. They have usually been trained at universities or universities of technology with structured workplace induction.

The ‘hands’ of our society have traditionally had on-the-job training after coming in vast numbers through an uneven schooling system where it is said they are not able enough or are simply too poor to get any further education.

Artisans straddle the divide as, in the past, they took some ‘N’ trade theory courses but the bulk of their training happens at work, and afterwards often take ‘foreman’ roles for management.

The access routes to these different stations is summarised in the diagram *Option One*.

### Option 1



It is clear that those on the upper rungs have the greatest amount of preparatory learning as well as longer periods of structured workplace induction whilst those at the base have little of either.

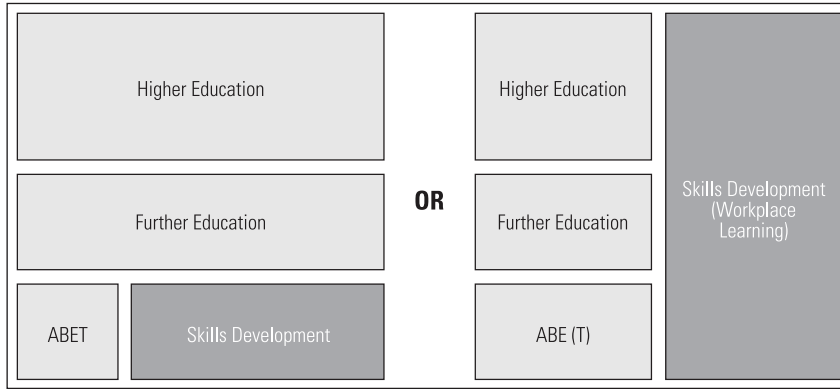
### WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Cosatu (Congress of South African Trade Unions) and its affiliates have representation on the National Skills Authority, various Seta Boards (Sector Education & Training Authority) and sit on

training committees at company level. Through these structures they have influence over the spending of the multi-billion rand skills levy. These points of leverage fall under the skills development system. So how can Cosatu use this influence?

Often skills development is seen by many as learning up to the level of artisan only, with no relevance for higher education as in *Option One* diagram. But there is another view shown in *Option Two* where

**Option 2**



you can see skills development and learning can take place at the workplace at all levels and not only at the lower skills level.

There are a few examples of *Option Two*. Take for example the work of the Fasset (Financial and Allied Services Seta), which designs 'learnerships' for students who have completed their accounting diplomas. On completion of the learnership students can register with the professional accounting body. This shows how skills development and universities of technology can work together in 'work integrated learning' and can fall under skills development and so qualify for a skills grant.

The new Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) and the Council for Higher Education (CHE) will now report to the same minister so it is possible that this idea could be applied to *all* occupational learning.

How could it work? The QCTO has, drawing on international models, devised an Organising Framework for Occupations (OFO) which contains a list of all occupations which can be updated easily. This list is useful because it groups together similar jobs under a common title and makes it easy for people in the labour market as well as people in colleges and universities to use the same terms for the same occupations. It creates a common language of occupations.

The QCTO plans to set up Committees of Expert Practitioners (CEPs) for each occupation or group

of related occupations. These CEPs could work with those responsible for setting the curriculum for occupationally-linked courses in universities and colleges. At present trades and occupations are taught very separately from higher education diplomas and degrees.

If Cosatu and its allies engaged with this new environment strategically they could begin to challenge the 'head/hand' divide. Here are some ideas of how this could be done. The ideas are grouped under three headings: long, medium and short term.

**LONG-TERM INTERVENTIONS**

Although these interventions will take time to bear fruit, there is nothing to stop them starting soon. I consider four interventions below.

The *first* flows from the reality that many firms are simply 'hands' when viewed by international companies. The intellectual knowledge for the production processes and the products they make is often privately owned by individuals or firms based abroad which the South African company must pay to use. Cosatu's support for South African-based production ideas will help to challenge this trend. New initiatives offer opportunities to challenge the division of jobs between 'heads' and 'hands'.

The *second* intervention is to look at ways workers could bargain for *decision making* to move down the grading ladder at work. This would help to reshape occupations which traditionally contain no decision

making. It would help create broader and more authoritative jobs which could enhance worker control on the shopfloor. Pilot projects with state-owned enterprises and firms where pension or union funds are invested would be a good place to start. The results could be fed into the work of CEPs and could spread more broadly.

The *third* intervention is alliances. In order to determine what additional skills and knowledge are required, workers will need to know more than is often currently the case. Where can they get this knowledge?

The most direct way is for industrial workers to form alliances with the people who already have this knowledge such as the skilled workers in Solidarity and the professionals under professional councils. Finding mutually beneficial ways to cement these alliances would be necessary.

For example Cosatu could offer to widen the scope of training that qualifies for skills grants if Solidarity and the professionals agree to work with Cosatu on the CEPs to open the way for workers to advance to higher level occupations. They would have to agree such mutually beneficial ways in advance to help protect workers' interests. The aim would be to learn the skills of those at higher levels, and would also be to change the roles of those in higher occupations to become more worker-friendly.

The *fourth* long-term intervention relates to the curriculae of courses themselves.

At the moment most of the higher ranking occupational courses insist on science and mathematics before you apply. This means access is restricted to those who can cope with these subjects. If courses were to *start* with the *application* of science and mathematics and incrementally unwrap the scientific principles that they embody, workers

would have a better chance of making progress and getting some real RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning).

Redesigning courses is an enormous task, but if it helped to open access to the majority, it would be worthwhile. Perhaps it could be done with other countries facing similar challenges of inequality, skills shortages and poverty?

### MEDIUM-TERM INTERVENTIONS

#### ***System-wide agreements between 'education' and 'skills development' to work together***

If the CHE and QCTO entered a Memorandum of Understanding that required them to work together for the theory and practical sides of *all* occupationally-linked courses then it would be possible for a more energetic debate to take place between the two sides. At present they have no contact.

This would help those with practical experience gain access to courses that would help them get a greater understanding of the principles that underpin the work they know. This will open up pathways for advancement.

#### ***Address the cost of training time***

Until occupational courses weld theory and practice, the current 'theory first' courses are all that exist for workers. The problem for workers is that they often have basics to catch up and these courses are mainly full-time and they cannot get enough paid time off to attend them. Too often workers get only five days for training, and even that is not widespread.

Workers need years, not days, to get their heads around the theories that make sense of the work they do. If workers are to have a 'second chance', this needs to be taken into account. The campaign for significant training days from firms has largely failed, so workers need to find

alternative solutions, and ones which will give them *much more* time for learning. Here is one idea.

In the past it was parastatals or state-owned enterprises that did a great deal of the training for the labour market. But that was before these institutions were transformed into market-oriented bodies expected to perform on market principles. Since they have been commercialised, and some privatised, the chance of them becoming agencies for mass training is slim.

An alternative approach would be to create a *Virtual Parastatal or Virtual State-Owned Enterprise* (how about a VSOE?) which could do two things. It could pay for workers to have significant time off for training and give youngsters from educational institutions the chance to take their places whilst workers study, so they too can benefit.

It could also be available to communities and the public and include social development and private sectors. It could create bridges for 'graduates' from the Expanded Public Works Programmes. The Workplace Skills Plan (WSP) could be an important vehicle to achieve this. Imagine if only registered occupational courses were included on the WSP and workers had the right to study them on extended time off arrangements while a student who needs work training and experience replaces them. The funding for such a system could be taken from a mixture of the National Skills Fund and the Workplace Skills Plan grant.

#### ***Human Resources Development Strategy (HRDS)***

In November last year the government published a draft HRDS II strategy and asked the public to respond by January in time for the elections. It is a strategy that looks across the whole education and training system and identifies national

priorities. Cosatu could demand that the HRDS be negotiated just as the National Skills Development Strategy was negotiated. This would give workers an option to prioritise the learning that they think is important.

### SHORT-TERM INTERVENTIONS

The above ideas need time to develop and implement. However there are some things that could be done immediately to help challenge the 'head/hand' divide.

#### ***Workplace Skills Plans should include accredited training only***

In today's uncertain economic climate, it makes little sense for workers to learn skills for a single workplace – especially when the training to attain the skills is funded under the levy scheme. If employers need particular skills, let them do so at their own cost. The inclusion of accredited training only is a simple and clear demand.

#### ***Adult basic education and training (Abet).***

The mines and elsewhere are piloting a new approach to Abet with much shorter and focused courses. If more learning is needed for any occupation or course then that learning can happen in the occupational courses themselves. It is an alternative to the Abet 'school-like' courses for adults. This will be easier for workers who have little time to study. Cosatu may like to consider it.

Challenging the 'head/hand' divide requires multiple strategies and the ideas presented here are not sufficient. But they might help workers to gain a better understanding of the work they must control and steer if they are to build the society they envision. LB

*Adrienne Bird is currently researching the history of engineering pathing in South Africa over the last century.*