

Post-school education in the Vaal

Identifying possibilities for change

Post-school education should take into account both the needs of the learners and of their community. Therefore, it is important to consider learners' interests as well as the context of their lived experiences, write **Sandile Zwane, David Balwanz and Itumeleng Moabi.**

We begin by sharing three conclusions. First, while we met many dedicated educators and students during our research, we came to the conclusion that post-school education does not sufficiently serve the needs and interests of poor and working-class communities in the Vaal. Our second conclusion is that even if we do everything possible to 'improve implementation' of post-schooling (for example, produce more graduates with qualifications), it will not be enough to meet the needs of the communities in which they are located. Put another way, education alone cannot solve the social and economic problems of the Vaal. Our third conclusion is that the youth and educators are becoming increasingly disillusioned, disempowered, and cynical about the promise of education to lead to a better life. Troublingly, this disillusion extends to expectations of local government – which several participants suggested was uninterested and self-serving.

This article shares how we came to these conclusions while also

identifying possibilities for change and is based on findings from Emerging Voices 2 (EV2) project of the Education Policy Consortium (EPC). EV2 is a two-year Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET)-funded research project which asks 'how can post-school education better meet the needs of poor and working-class communities in South Africa?' This article draws on findings from data collected from 2013 to 2014 in the Vaal and we gratefully acknowledge the support and participation of Vaal University of Technology, Sedibeng Further Education and Training (FET) College (Sebokeng Campus), several Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) centres, the youth who we engaged with and several youth organisations and NGOs in the Vaal, Thetha FM, Sebokeng zone 13 library and its staff and the EV2 Youth Research Learning and Advocacy team in completing this research.

THE POWER OF MYTH

Our research findings conflict with a powerful myth: that expansion of post-school education is the solution to the problems facing

South Africa's poor and working-class communities. Individuals internalise a similar myth: If you work hard in school and get a qualification, then you will be rewarded with a job in the formal sector and material wealth. There are three problems with these myths. The first is the persistence of unemployment in South Africa. Compared to 20 years ago, a much larger percentage of the population in South Africa has gained access to post-school education. In spite of this positive trend, official unemployment in South Africa remains at 35%: the same in 2014 as it was in 1994 (StatsSA 2014). In 2011, of the 85,594 economically active youth (15–35 years) in the Emfuleni Local Municipality, 45% were unemployed (StatsSA). During our research we identified a large number of students who, while they once believed in this myth, are increasingly finding it full of holes. One student notes, 'it would really help though to study something that will enable you to live a better life at the end of your studies. Education was once called a key to success but now ... No,' (VUT Student A).



Sharing ideas at VUT: Students discuss points.

The second issue is that the myth promotes individualism and a 'qualifications' focus. A VUT student identifies this issue, stating, 'they'll say you need a degree if you want to be employed. If you come with a degree they say you need five years' experience to be considered for employment,' (VUT student B). In this scenario, education becomes a 'positional good': to be competitive for scarce formal sector jobs, individuals seek increasingly higher levels of qualification and experience. This situation also places the blame on the individual for their own unemployment: a person is unemployed because they studied the wrong subject or didn't study hard enough - not because unemployment is a structural feature of the economy.

A third issue is that the myth is silent on alternative explanations for the persistence of poverty and underdevelopment. Business interest in increasing profit is a

double-edged sword: profit may enrich owners or shareholders, but savings may come from reducing labour costs based on policies of casualisation, hiring contract workers or hiring fewer workers with degree qualifications. One interviewee states that in some cases, industry prefers to hire less qualified individuals for certain types of work, because they do not want to pay VUT graduates the remuneration determined by the government (VUT student C).

Why do these myths persist? Because, even with these broad structural challenges, at an individual level, getting a post-school qualification remains one of the best ways for an individual to improve his or her life chances. While many youth expressed disillusionment with post-school education, they see no alternative. Instead they ask, 'Do we try our luck, or just give up?' (TVET College student A).

IS EDUCATION ABOUT DOING WHAT YOU'RE TOLD OR WHAT YOU LOVE?

Nearly all young people we spoke with said that education can play an important role in helping them to realise their dreams. But dreams are not created in a vacuum, as evidenced by the quotes below students' dreams are shaped by several influences.

'There's this sort of culture in my family, if you have once failed in younger [earlier] grades, you have to do commerce subjects but if you didn't fail, you have to do science subjects. So I didn't fail, I was forced to do science at school,' (VUT student D).

'So then my parents now notice [that] but [name of student] is good in mathematics ... she should become an accountant. But meanwhile I'm more into arts and design,' (VUT student E)

'Post-schooling institutions are too rigid. We need flexibility. We should be allowed to follow our dreams,

take our chances and learn. We are not being challenged to speak our minds or showcase our talents, instead we are given modules that were created by some professors' (TVET College student B).

Schooling here is associated with a set of 'informal' rules: the purpose of schooling is to get qualifications, some subjects are for 'intelligent' students, and student participation, as well as their interests and experiences are under-valued. For students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, there may be pressure from family members to earn an income. We do not draw on this data to argue that students should follow one or another particular path. However, we think it is important to highlight that students often feel pressure to 'do what they're told' as opposed to using education as a process to discover who they are and what they're interested in.

WISHES OF STUDENTS AND LECTURERS

Students and lecturers want support, sufficient resources and learning that is meaningful and practical. Many students identified a strong need for academic and career guidance as well as counselling to help them deal with financial and personal and psychological issues. Here we emphasise that students from marginalised backgrounds face multiple disadvantages to succeeding in post-school education and thus require additional academic and personal support - especially in their first years of study, write Johnson and Hlatshwayo.

Nearly all students we spoke with emphasised the need for more practical experience, sufficient learning materials, and more exposure to industry

and work experience and better job-placement support. One student says, 'what is a technical college without technical skills/practical? You cannot teach me to operate a computer theoretically - No, not in a technical college! We don't have resources, we are taught only theory,' (TVET College student C). One lecturer notes, 'industry does not want to cooperate with us, they don't want to take our learners and give them practical training,' (TVET College lecturer).

Here we see the tension between 'improved implementation' and structural unemployment. In fact, according to DHET, one of the reasons the NCV includes practical training at the TVET colleges is because of 'difficulties in finding opportunities [for training] in the labour market'.



Education with production: Sewing machines at TVET College in Sebokeng.

We also collected data on informal sector activities and from informal youth development organisations. In these spaces, people spoke of 'meaningful' skills, they sought education related to their personal and communal context, their interest in making life easier, and their goals of supporting their families and strengthening communities. Here skills development may be related to RDP houses (for example, carpentry, electricity, plumbing, or design), using technology, substance abuse counselling, or community organising. In some cases, a post-school qualification is necessary, however, in other cases, other forms of skills development may be more appropriate.

STRENGTHENING A SOCIAL CHANGE PROCESS

Communities in the Vaal have a large number of unmet developmental challenges. Based on our research we believe that DHET's expansion of access to TVET colleges, community colleges and universities can play an important role in the social and economic development of poor and working-class communities in the Vaal. Where we part company with government policy is that we question the belief that individualised and market-oriented solutions are the only answer. Based on our research, we offer two proposals.

Post-school institutions must be more deliberate in engaging with communities, inclusive of all groups, to identify local education and development priorities

For example, TVET colleges could establish centres for Local Economic Development (LED) and Local Community

and Social Development (LCD) with missions to listen and respond to local developmental priorities as well as expertise and research capability in how to design, establish, and run enterprises such as small-scale businesses, cooperatives, and social service initiatives. In one of our research dialogues, ABET lecturers suggested we go out and interview the community about the skills they want to learn in the centre. 'Already we have ancillary health care, they learn more about health promotion. We also have sewing, plumbing and fashion design' (ABET lecturer A).

Wedekind and Muterero provide one example of how TVET colleges can co-develop skills programmes with local industries. During our research, we found a large number of skilled people, many of whom are unemployed or who work in the informal sector. TVET colleges could re-vitalise their mission by thinking critically about local social issues (for example, poverty, crime, joblessness) and develop new ideas and programmes which harness existing local skills and potential in positive ways.

Post-schooling should place an increased priority on exposure to a variety of learning experiences and helping young people recognise and explore their talents and potentials

One student notes: 'You should expose learners, rather than talking too much, so after the exposure then you can try talking to them, maybe like career exhibitions at an early age, going to places like Mittal and all those kind of stuff, and after they see what's going on, that's when you can start saying, I'm talking to them, trying to open their mind

and listen to what they think about it,' (VUT student G).

Here practical experience, work experience, participation in student groups and activities, and exposure to a variety of disciplines and activities are important, not only because they may help a student get a job, but because they help students learn who they are, what they are good at and where they want to go in life. We believe that such a change is important if we want learners to develop the agency needed to become responsible adults and citizens.

One major shortcoming of our research is that we did not sufficiently interrogate issues facing young women. Some of the issues requiring further research include the persistence of violence and sexual violence against women in communities and at institutions of education, sexual exploitation of women in the community and at work, and the persistence of gender stereotypes in academic and work settings. One of our interviewees argued that youth needed to be reminded that their freedom isn't something which 'fell from heaven' (ABET lecturer B). In this sentiment, he summarises a new mission for post-school education: engaging youth in an ongoing and collective mission of social change and transformation. ^{LB}

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This article was first published in the Post-School Education Review 1(3) July 2015.