



## Skills development in public vocational education and training institutions

In this section, we focus on the nature of skills development offered in formal public institutions. We draw from a separate project commissioned by the Department of Higher Education and Training, that is, an audit of Further Education and Training colleges. The first article highlights the current 'size and shape' of enrolments in this sector, which is expected to grow dramatically over the next decade. The second article focuses on governance and management challenges at different levels to identify policy recommendations.

### FET college sector fails to meet great expectations

The findings of a 2010 audit of the Further Education and Training (FET) college sector reveal a sector in disarray. **MICHAEL COSSER** identifies key governance and management challenges, and reflects on systemic inefficiencies that can inform current policy proposals.

**M**uch has been expected from the FET college sector. The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) looks to it to provide the intermediate-level and artisanal skills to mitigate the shortage of people to fill positions available in the technicians and associated professionals occupational category and thereby massively alleviate unemployment.

The DHET recognises, however, that there is great unevenness in the college sector; some colleges (and some provinces) performing much better than others.

As outlined in its Green Paper on Post-School Education and Training (2012), stronger-performing colleges are the vehicle through which the DHET seeks to expand provision.

Against this backdrop, the HSRC was approached to undertake an audit of the sector. Accordingly we undertook, together with a range of consortium partners, a two-day audit of all 50 FET colleges in South Africa. Setting out to gauge whether colleges could operate semi-autonomously within a national dispensation under the DHET, the audit focused on college governance, management, and efficiency.

The findings of the governance component of the FET audit show that there are shortcomings at each of the three levels of governance: college, provincial and national.

#### SHORTCOMINGS AT COLLEGE LEVEL

Here there are three areas of concern: college councillors — while they may on balance have the right paper qualifications for the job — display vastly differing governance skills.

Secondly, the fact that no college has created its own college statute or even appropriated for itself the statute proposed in the FET Colleges Act suggests a resignation to conformity rather than a quest for autonomy.

And thirdly, the widespread absence of any meaningful engagement with the King III principles on corporate governance bespeaks complacency, confirming the failure to act autonomously.

#### SHORTCOMINGS AT PROVINCIAL LEVEL

At this level there are four problem areas:

- Arising from the policy that management staff should be appointed by the province and the remainder of the college staff by the college council, there appears to have been poor governance of the employment contracts of college staff, leading to confusion in many colleges about which staff are state-employed and which are employed by the council.
- There has at best been uneven approval of colleges' strategic plans — a requirement of the

FET Colleges Act of 2006.

- Given the sheer size of the schooling sector, provincial oversight of schools and FET colleges has inevitably ushered in the relative neglect of colleges that has extended to funding disparities and, in some cases, the channelling of funds earmarked for colleges to schools.

- Provinces have not seemed to recognise, and have therefore not adequately overseen, the distinctive governance and management functions of college councils and college management teams, which has led to tensions in the ways colleges are run.

#### SHORTCOMINGS AT NATIONAL LEVEL

The most far-reaching problems, however, stem from decisions taken at national level. Here there were also three areas of concern:

- The number of policy interventions and the sheer speed with which they have been introduced and replaced has contributed to instability in the college sector as a whole, and to greater instability in colleges in certain provinces than in others.
- Policy intervention has not always been accompanied by clearly formulated plans — colleges being left in some instances to interpret policy for themselves.
- The dual accountability effected by the em-



ployment model — management staff reporting to the province, non-management staff reporting to the college council — has ushered in many tensions among council members and management staff alike, tensions that have paralysed both college governance and college management to differing degrees in different provinces and colleges. This means, for example, that council members are not able to comment on principals' performances since they report to the provincial director for FET.

The cumulative effect of this litany of shortcomings is a sector that lacks clear direction in the area of college governance.

#### MANAGEMENT ISSUES

From a management perspective, the audit found that, although there was compliance with most financial requirements of the FET Colleges Act of 2006, the number of qualified audits across the system suggests serious shortcomings in financial reporting. On average, each college in the country received a qualified audit in one of the three years under review – 2007, 2008, or 2009 – while some colleges had three qualified audits.

Outside the financial sphere, the problematic management areas are the following:

- The investigation of the effectiveness of the information and communications technology (ICT) platform revealed that colleges collectively have a long way to go in meeting the needs of their end-users; the national average score on a range of indicators being 29 out of a possible 42 points.

- The data on college tracking of graduates and non-completers revealed that only 18 of the 50 colleges know what becomes of their students after they leave the college, and are therefore ignorant about their labour market involvement.

- The paucity of skills development-related memoranda of understanding (MoUs) with stakeholders, a key indicator of community engagement, depicts a sector largely insulated from its place in broader society. There were, on average, two MoUs with the business sector, one with SETAs, one with other education institutions, and one with local government per college in 2009.

#### EFFICIENCY OF FET COLLEGES

The aspect of efficiency evaluated by the FET audit was student throughput rates (defined as the portion of students successfully completing their studies) in three categories of FET college provision: the National Certificate (Vocational) (NC(V)); the NATED Report 191 (or N) programmes; and other programmes (including occupational and skills programmes).

The sector's flagship programme, the NC(V), achieved a national average throughput rate of 30 % per annum over a three-year period (2007–2009). The N programmes achieved 47 %, and other programmes 66 %. These results are of particular concern in the context of the DHET's intention to increase enrolments in the sector to one million students by 2014, and to four million students in the post-school (non-university) sector as a whole by 2030.

#### POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

The key issues for policy consideration arising from these three areas — governance, management, and efficiency are the following:

- The imminent shift from provincial to national governance of the FET college sector effectively places college councils on a par with school governing bodies, but with more restricted powers. If councils are to be effective, their members need to be trained in college governance roles and well versed in the principles of corporate governance. Those colleges with effective governance and management capabilities will be able to achieve greater autonomy of functioning.

- On paper, all four of the provincial governance shortcomings identified in the audit will be addressed through the shift from provincial to national oversight of the FET college sector, but the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of the college sector will still happen at provincial level. The DHET will need to ensure that, whatever form that M&E takes, it address the tensions at provincial and college level outlined above.

- In the light of the fact that there is a lack of policy continuity because the sector has been subjected to a number of policy interventions over a relatively short period, the DHET needs to stabilise the FET college sector through a clear determination of the role of FET colleges in the broader education and training system, particularly in the context of the restructuring of post-schooling. The orientation of college programme provision (technical versus more broadly vocational), the student categories colleges admit (grade 9 learners, matriculants, adult learners), and the educational and economic levels and sectors for which colleges prepare their students are key points that decisive policy and implementation must address. ◀ ◀

This article is based on a report entitled: *Further Education and Training (FET) Colleges at a Glance in 2010. FET Colleges Audit, May – July 2010*, commissioned by the National Board for Further Education and Training, subsumed by the DHET. A copy of the report is available on [www.hsrc.ac.za](http://www.hsrc.ac.za)

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