



The Green Paper for post-school Education and Training: A panacea or an ambitious plan we cannot achieve?

A synopsis by the Public Servants Association

Introduction

In January 2012, the department of Higher Education and Training published the green paper for post-school education and training, calling for the public to comment. Whereas as the PSA we may not have been able to submit our comments before the deadline of April 2012, it remains important for us as a public sector union regularly to keep our members informed about issues at the centre of our national discourse. The green paper is one of those important developments we should watch carefully as a union.

Given the magnitude of the challenges of our education system, high youth unemployment and skills shortage, the PSA welcomes the green paper as it contributes to a growing discourse on how to restructure our economy, create opportunities for growth and develop sustainable livelihoods for our youths. The following is a synopsis of the PSA's perspective on the green paper. We have carefully selected issues that we think are at the heart of the paper and of interest to our members, hence we refer to this article as a synopsis.

Understanding post-school education: need for conceptual clarity

The phrase post-school education is interpreted differently in different countries. For instance, in the UK, the phrase is commonly used to refer to post-secondary education qualification, specifically college and university qualification. In this instance, it is assumed that school education is a prerequisite for entry into post-school education.

In South Africa it seems slightly different. Here, one does not necessarily need to have acquired school education in order to gain access to post-school education. As the green paper clearly stipulates, post-school education refers to "education for people who have left school as well as those adults who have never been to school but require education opportunities."ⁱⁱ In this instance, Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET), work place education and training, would be part of post-school education.

While the PSA supports the vision for "a single, coherent, differentiated and highly articulated post-school education and training system,"ⁱⁱⁱ we would hasten to caution that care must be exercised not to compromise the Department of Higher Education and Training's (DHET) capacity to give required attention to all institutions (from ABET, Further Education and Training Colleges, to Universities).



If caution is not exercised, this may compromise the very vision for which the green paper is set to achieve. The diversity of the constituencies for which the green paper is set and their needs require specialised attention and different approaches. For instance, a person who drop-out of school before grade 9 and one who completed matric are certainly different. This may render the development of a single and coherent system impossible to achieve. It is for this reason that conceptual clarity would be required in defining what is meant by post-school education.

A panacea or an ambitious plan we cannot achieve?

The green paper has its strengths and its weaknesses. It is bold in its wishes and weak on “the how”. Its strength lies in the analysis of the challenges that beset our education system, while its lack of detail on how to transform the system for the better is its shortfall. Its targets are as ambitious as they are unrealistic.

The somewhat rhetorical style of the paper limits its capacity to become solution driven. For instance, there are very many statements that very many of our members would find hard to disagree with; yet they will still ask “the how” question. For example, in page 41, the paper says “Improvement of throughput rates must be the top strategic priority of university education.”ⁱⁱⁱ The PSA agrees with this assertion. However, clarity on how universities should increase the throughput is not provided.

Are the targets realistic?

The green paper proposes to increase enrolment in higher education from 900 000 to 1.5 million in 2030, and from 300 000 to 4 million students in the FET colleges. While these targets maybe enticing given South Africa’s acute shortage of skills, they appear unrealistic. That no thorough analysis is provided on the financial and human resource implications these increases would have on the institutions and the fiscus, makes these targets doubtful to achieve. It is for these reasons that the question by the Council on Higher Education is important to be repeated: “Why would these targets succeed given that previous projections and targets remain unachieved?”^{iv} The CHE recalls that the 2001 National Plan for Higher Education target of 20 per cent participation rate in higher education had not been achieved by 2011.

Realignment with the National Development Plan

The national development plan (NDP), now adopted as the development agenda for South Africa, provides an overarching vision and plan for our country. The failure of the green paper to acknowledge the NDP, let alone to draw from it, makes the green paper a standalone plan that has no bearing on the success of the national development agenda.

It is important for any plan, especially a plan on education, to find anchorage on the shared and common development agenda of a country. This is what the NDP has given us: a shared vision for the future. That the green paper did not find space, let alone a footnote to make reference to the NDP is deeply regrettable. The incongruence of targets is shocking. For instance the NDP projects a target of 1.250 million people enrolled in our FET colleges by 2030 while the green paper enrolment target is 4 million. It is our view as the PSA that it is possible to be ambitious while at the same time being realistic. Thus we urge for the realignment of the green paper with the national development plan.

Implications for the targets

That the proposed increases would have serious implications for staffing, infrastructure and financial sustainability of the institutions is obvious. Our higher education system is already failing to meet the required demand of 25 000 teachers per year.^v

How would it, then, meet the demands for the FET college lecturers, the proposed Community Education Centres, and for itself? All these details are missing from the green paper.

There is already a looming crisis of a shortage of academic staff in the higher education system. We all agree with the observation that “the academic profession is ageing and requires renewal...”^{vi} However, the implications of the proposed extension of retirement age on the work force should be considered. The PSA will be happy to engage with the Minister on this issue as it affects our members and constituency directly.

That there is no financial analysis of what the proposed changes would require, raises yet another question about the feasibility of the proposals contained in the paper. The absence of this crucial detail deprives South Africans of an open discussion on the cost of education. It is for these reasons that we agree with the apt summation by Rhodes University that “the green paper is big on vision and short on detail.”^{vii}

FET colleges: from afterthought to institutions of choice

Further Education and Training Colleges are taken for granted in South Africa. They are generally an afterthought for many students and parents. Many school-going youth only enrol in FET colleges when they are rejected by higher education or when they cannot afford.

As Helene Perold illustrates in her recently published co-edited book: “Shaping the Future of South Africa’s Youth: Rethinking post-school education and skills training” FET colleges struggle to attract the very age groups for which they are targeted. For example, “In 2010, they enrolled 0.6% of 15- to 17-year-olds, 3.2% of 18- to 24-year-olds and 0.2% of 25- to 35-year-olds. There were also low rates of completion of higher certificates, of around 40%, indicating an inefficient system and poorly prepared students.”^{viii} This is despite the acute shortage of vocational and artisan skills in South Africa, mainly provided for by these colleges.

If there is a huge contribution the green paper could make is to raise the profile of FET colleges into becoming institutions of choice. As the CHE suggest, this would require the creation “of occupational and vocational qualifications that are post-matric, and are alongside higher education and which have as worthy alternatives to higher education.” Such qualifications must be “linked to currency in the labour market.”

The paper is also silent on the role of FETs in stimulating an entrepreneurial spirit among the youth. The purpose of our education cannot only be about churning out hordes of job seekers. It should also be about empowering our youth to become productive entrepreneurs, industrialists and employment creators. The PSA therefore urges the Minister for Higher Education to consider introducing entrepreneurship as part of curriculum in the FET colleges. This, in our view, can help uplift the status of FET colleges among our youths.

The current practice and perception of FETs qualification as bridging courses to higher education is not helping the development of a strong FET sector. While the provision of these qualifications should however not deprive access to higher education, the emphasis should be on development of skills that would make the graduates employable in the labour market. Only then will FET colleges claim their place as institutions of choice rather than dumping grounds for rejects of higher education.

Conclusion

As the PSA, we support the green paper for post-school education and training with the hope that some of the issues highlighted above would find expression in the forthcoming white paper. The challenges of our education system are huge and require all of us to pull together as a nation. We hope therefore that the minister will heed our call for the realignment of his plans with those articulated in the national development plan. It is possible, in our view, for the green paper to become a real remedy to our ailing post-school education system – if some of the challenges we have highlighted are addressed.

References

ⁱ DHET, 2012, Green paper for Post-school education and training, Pretoria: DHET.

ⁱⁱ DHET, *ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ DHET, *ibid.*

^{iv} CHE, 2012, Comment on the Green paper for post school education and training, CHE.

^v Centre for Development Enterprise

^{vi} DHET, *ibid.*

^{vii} Rhodes University, Comments on the green paper for post-school education and training. Rhodes University

^{viii} Perold H., Cloete N., and Papier J., 2012, Shaping the future of South Africa's youth: Rethinking post-school education and training, Somerset West: CHET.