

Adults need customised education

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“Wow, all our cries have been heard!” I thought after first reading the green paper on post-school education and training that Higher Education and Training Minister Blade Nzimande released in January. It is clear that much thought, hard work and care has gone into the paper. It acknowledges the serious situation we face as a country and offers real steps to address it.

But a sinking feeling quickly followed the euphoria of the first read. For a start, much of what the paper says has been said before. But more than that, it also envisages even more professional bodies, more bureaucrats, more rules and more control.

We have learned, especially in adult education, that unless such bodies are filled with professional, far-thinking, strategic people, they simply become gatekeepers who slow down processes and grow their own staff.

The provision of adult education in South Africa after 1994 has taken routes that have often resulted in substantial policy documents but little change on the ground.

A good example was the move in 1998 to give the old-style “night schools” a new name, namely public adult learning centres. The change of name, a new curriculum and the establishment of largely ineffective centre governing bodies did little to change the fact that these centres, by and large, catered for second- and third-chance matriculants. It meant that the adult basic education and training (Abet) students for whom the centres were intended to cater were always in a minority.

What’s in a name?

Now the green paper proposes a further name change to “community education and training centres”. It also proposes that the challenges facing these centres, including part-time educators, second-chance matriculants and the needs of actual Abet students, be addressed by separate task teams to advise the minister on the way forward.

The non-governmental organisation for which I work, Project Literacy, has been fortunate to be part of all major Abet pilot projects over the past 15 years. But a great concern of ours has been the lack of follow-through in all these initiatives and a strange inability to acknowledge basic truths.

One of these truths is that two -government campaigns – the South African national literacy initiative and the Kha ri Gude mass literacy campaign – to provide very basic literacy were launched in 2002 and 2008, respectively, with great fanfare, but they failed to grab national attention or receive the political profile they needed.

Another such truth centres on students who complete a very basic literacy course as well as the failure of attempts to fill the public adult learning centres with new, eager students in the lower-level courses. Some students choose only basic -literacy and decide not to progress and it is the failure to link two separate systems – now also divided between two ministries – that remains a problem.

The biggest truth we have learned over the past 40 years of Project Literacy's operation is that one size cannot fit all. This in itself is a difficult thing for the government to manage and implement. Bureaucracies, by their very nature, function well with rule books, inspectorates and set curriculums. They have been fairly rigid in trying to force a formal general education and training certificate on adult students. But that is a thinly disguised copy of the school curriculum, which is too long and too detailed for most adult students, making the success rate among them dismal.

Furthermore, the hope that this certificate would open the door for students to proceed to further education and training colleges, in particular, has been there on paper but has not worked in practice. For many rural students the real need is to link an improvement in English and maths ability with a skill – gardening, for example – that will increase self-sustainability or enable one to sell skilled labour such as brick-laying.

This less formal approach has been made difficult by both a lack of funding for such skills training and the constant demand that -students write exams to meet national standards. Similarly, skills trainers who may be good at brick-making but not at maths are not formally employed by the education system because they do not meet national teacher qualifications.

No quick-fixes

The largest and most challenging group is the millions of unemployed, underschooled, desperate and potentially volatile young people who see a community learning centre as a place for redress and a quick-fix entry point into the world of tertiary education and employment. The slow pace of a formal curriculum and the mixed group of students in the adult classroom have left these young people dissatisfied and often further alienated.

Programmes run by some Skills Education and Training Authorities and the National Skills Fund have, in the main, been more accepting than the higher education department's Abet subdirectorates of the need to link language acquisition to skills training and employability. They have linked language, maths and a skill in a neat, compact form that has left their students more satisfied because they see immediate changes in their abilities.

The fact that all the provision of adult education is undertaken by part-time staff is a problem the green paper acknowledges, and it suggests solving it by upgrading teachers and making posts more permanent.

This makes sense, because part-time educators are loath to go the extra mile and staff turnover is very high because good educators move to more lucrative training opportunities or enter the formal schooling system.

A critical problem the green paper does not address is the stop-start method of funding, which has resulted in thousands of adults completing one level of learning only to wait a year or more for the programme to be offered again. Such haphazard funding shrinks the capacity of Abet providers and leaves students disillusioned.

By contrast, in programmes funded by the National Skills Fund, large service providers work with small community-based organisations to implement academic and skills training at village level. This model works well in a reasonably informal manner, because students can choose their own curriculum in terms of the provision of skills.

But these types of interventions demand multi-year funding if their impact is to be real and sustained. Otherwise, as the green paper notes in its introduction, we are all just in the business of chasing numbers, not changing lives.

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