
Not grasping the nettle:¹ Dilemmas in creating and funding a new institutional environment for adult, community, and technical and vocational education and training institutions

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ABSTRACT

In spite of constitutional guarantees, ambitious policy promises, some initial enthusiasm for adult basic education and a well-run literacy campaign, South Africa has signally failed to construct a viable and vibrant adult and community education system that would parallel or enhance not only existing schooling, but also technical and vocational education systems. This article considers the current state of adult and community education and of technical and vocational education and training; in addition, it assesses the relevant recommendations in the *Report of the commission of inquiry into higher education and training* released in late 2017. Finally, it evaluates the extent to which the commission's recommendations correspond to the reality and also to what is required for South Africa's post-school offerings in the future.

KEYWORDS

adult education; community education; TVET; higher education and training

¹ The figurative statement 'grasping the nettle' is an exhortation aimed at encouraging the hearer to deal with a difficult problem boldly and bravely. The phrase refers to the characteristic of the stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*) to inject painful toxins into the skin when one brushes against its stiff poisonous hairs. However, if the plant is grasped firmly, the hairs tend to be pushed flat and do not penetrate the skin. The implication is that not grasping the nettle firmly is actually counter-productive and painful.

Introduction

The reconstitution of post-school education and training in the post-apartheid, post-1994 period is characterised by the following broad features:

First, in general, the attempted massification of higher education where the number of university students has gradually swelled, though throughput has remained poor; mergers between and the rationalisation of universities; and a creeping managerialism.

Secondly, the technical and vocational education and training (TVET) sector witnessed mergers among the former technical colleges now known as TVET colleges. The mergers were an attempt to bring about equity in previously racially segregated institutions, though the capacity to manage such merged institutions was extremely weak. Substantial capital injections by the state to recapitalise colleges and student financing underpinned subsequent growth.

Finally, in adult education, more specifically adult basic education, there was much promise in the mid-1990s due to advocacy on the part of South African trade unions in the interests of their members. However, after much initial activity and development, adult education floundered, in part due to the lack of priority given to it and partly because the increasingly austere economic environment at the time was producing a large pool of unemployed individuals (Aitchison, 2003a; 2003b; 2004). The 2013 White Paper on post-school education and training contained a series of proposals on new institutions – the so-called ‘community colleges’ (DHET, 2013a:20–24). The White Paper also indicated that a plan for adult and community education would follow.

‘Abnormal’ post-school education and training environment

In spite of copious reforms and reconstitutions, the South African education system is still a decidedly abnormal one. The number of students who eventually enter some form of post-school institution or programme does not match the increasing numbers of students passing out of Grade 12 with a National Senior Certificate (NSC). For example, the 2013 national education data show that 439 764 students passed the NSC; the number of places available in higher education institutions for new students was only around 40 000 for the 171 755 eligible matriculants to enter universities, and only 267 832 were eligible to enter TVET colleges (DBE, 2015; DHET, 2015). It is not clear how many students can be accommodated by the TVET institutions at the beginning of each year, but, generally, the numbers in these institutions are still lower than in the university sector. Young adults who never gained a Senior Certificate because they failed or dropped out of the school system at an earlier stage, and even those who have never attended school, are assumed to be taken up in adult education, even though enrolments in this sector have not changed much since 1994 (DHET, 2017b:114–115). It is therefore evident that, out of the entire cohort of young people, some do not finish the 12 years of school education, some fail, some pass poorly and only a minority go to university or to a TVET college. The majority reach an education-and-training dead end.

New governance arrangements – a ‘function shift’

An important development in the past decade has been the steady centralisation of the governance of post-school education. Both adult education and TVET were historically provincial government competencies until 2009, when legislation was passed to transfer the TVET college function to the new national Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). The DHET would take over the governance of TVET colleges and adult education institutions from provincial education departments (DHET, 2013b:38). Legislative amendments scheduled 31 March 2015 as the date for the final transfer or ‘function shift’. Whereas the transfer of TVET was relatively orderly, though not unproblematic, what occurred in the case of adult education was nothing short of bizarre.

The state adult education system was implemented through public adult learning centres (PALCs), which were essentially classes held in public-school premises after normal school hours and attended by adult learners undertaking formal adult basic education equivalent to formal schooling up to Grade 9, and the Senior Certificate or exit school qualification. For the many years of its existence, this sector has remained underfunded, poorly managed and often dysfunctional (see DHET 2017b:219–250). There were numerous calls for its complete reform and, eventually, a task team was set up in 2011 to consider a new institutional form for adult and community education, and to devise a plan for this sector.

However, before the task team’s report could be finalised, the national department informed the task team of a plan to rename all PALCs ‘community colleges’ and then immediately merge these PALCs/community colleges across the country into nine provincial/regional colleges. This was to give effect to the ‘function shift’ of the PALCs from provincial to national control. The task team was dismayed at this proposal for the PALCs – even though there was a clear need for rationalisation, clustering and linking to local community colleges, they had envisaged that such a process would need to be phased in over time and that attention would have to be paid to their educational effectiveness (DHET, 2017b:128–129). Given the lack of management capacity endemic in the PALCs, it was clear that there were limited resources for immediately setting up new community colleges modelled on the existing TVET college model. The task team saw this as a recipe for disaster – a legal sleight of hand that was bound to have poor outcomes. In spite of the task team’s objections, the bureaucratically convenient but doomed-to-fail process went ahead on 31 March/1 April 2015.

As predicted, enormous administrative problems followed the transition from provincial to national control, particularly regarding the remuneration paid to existing PALC staff. There also appeared to be a great lack of clarity as to who was actually responsible for ongoing support of the PALCs, given that no new community colleges were actually in existence. As yet (2018), no ‘new’ community colleges have been established, although acting principals and some community college council members have been appointed to serve at what are effectively community college administrative centres, one in each of the nine provinces. In essence, the already inadequately funded PALC system is still in operation (DHET, 2017b:129–133).

Currently, there are nine so-called community colleges, one in each province, that are, strictly speaking, community college administrative hubs (though they have very limited administrative capacity and their finances are currently handled by a local TVET college). Under each of them are PALCs, previously run by the Department of Education of the particular province, which continue to operate more or less as before. In due course, some of them may be officially recognised as community learning centres (the new term for a satellite of a community college). The community colleges seem to have been structured very much according to the TVET college model, with a principal, deputy principal and a council. It is a top-heavy, extremely expensive model and the *Draft policy on staffing norms for CET colleges* (DHET, 2016) allocates only 45% of the total budget to the teaching staff in the previous PALCs – where all the actual current ‘community college’ work is still done, as there are no new central community college campuses. Though it might be reasonable for a future situation when there are 50 or more actual local community colleges and where the majority of professional staff work on a central campus, for the present (and foreseeable future), when all the actual educational delivery is through the community learning centres and satellites, spending only 45% of the total budget on professional staff operating in these delivery sites seems absurd. There is little likelihood of local communities having their education and training needs addressed.

Government commissions and funding constraints

The hiatus in moving forward with the task team’s proposals on adult and community education and training has been attributed by policy-makers to a lack of finances (DHET, 2017b: 133–134). In relation to this issue, the government established a commission of inquiry into higher education and training (the Heher commission). The commission (2017:542) observed that:

This situation is unsustainable and has disastrous consequences for the sustainability of institutions. ... The CET and TVET sectors particularly need attention as they are severely underfunded, and cannot perform at their current funding levels.

Two recent policy documents on the funding of TVET and community colleges are the *Report of the ministerial committee on the review of the funding of TVET colleges and CET colleges* (DHET, 2017a; 2017b) and the *Report of the commission of inquiry into higher education and training* (Heher, 2017).

The ministerial committee’s recommendations are many and detailed; there are 58, but they can be summarised as follows (DHET, 2017a:27–41):

- More money is needed for TVET and community colleges.
- The funding formulas need to be revised and must ensure stable, predictable funding.
- The existing inequality of funding to TVET colleges in different provinces has to cease.
- The sector education and training authorities (SETAs) need to play a stronger role in ensuring guaranteed funding.
- Infrastructure and refurbishment are needed.

- Bridging and foundation programmes, and student support, are required.
- Theory and practice have to be reconnected.
- Comprehensive legislation supported by piloting and research, is required for community colleges.

The ministerial committee seriously addressed the issue of underprepared students and the knock-on effect this has on TVET college throughput. In this regard, recommendation 35 states that:

The real costs of remediating the failures in the school system and not having the TVET colleges clogged with unprepared students, have to be faced up to. If the community colleges are expected to do this, their funding (and general capacity) will have to reach a much higher level.

The ministerial committee also argued for the strengthening of the research capacity of the TVET and community college sectors in the following recommendations:

A programme of recruitment of both full-time and part-time researchers should be undertaken in both the TVET and CET sectors. Universities collaborating in support of these sectors will also be asked to steer promising research students into undertaking research studies on TVET and ACET (recommendation 57);

and

In both TVET colleges and Community Colleges, internal research capacity needs to be built in the long term, and this needs to be provided for by way of a percentage of the overall funding (recommendation 58).

Traditionally, adult education had been considered to be ‘the poor cousin’ when it came to educational financing, but the Heher commission clearly conveyed that there were in fact two ‘poor cousins’ – TVET and community education and training.

Currently, the total government budget for adult and community education is slightly more than R2 billion.

According to the Heher commission (2017:21), already by 2017 the government response to the so-called ‘Fees Must Fall’ protests had been a R16.2 billion top-up to university students and a cut in budget for TVET colleges (Heher, 2017:23). Some of the funding that had been intended for adult basic education for the unskilled and unemployed was also diverted from the National Skills Fund (NSF). To add to this funding crisis, in late December 2017 the then president announced that there would be free higher education for university students. Various analysts estimated that this could cost the state between R20 and R40 billion. The president had evidently ignored the passage in the Heher report (Heher, 2017:53) which cautioned that:

Free higher education in highly unequal societies mainly benefits the already-privileged (new political and business elite), who have the social, cultural and economic capital required to access, participate in and succeed at higher education.

The president also appeared to ignore the statements and recommendations in which Heher argued that any financial decisions must take into account the education sector as a whole (Heher, 2017:58, 541):

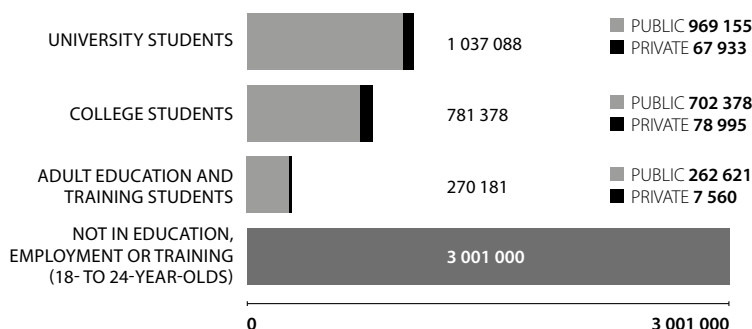
The needs of Community Education and Training should be taken into consideration before determining to allocate further funds to universities – approximately R46.21 billion in additional funding is needed for Community Education and Training over the Medium-Term Expenditure Framework.

Regarding the Post School Education and Training sector – the priorities in CET, TVET and universities need to be balanced – money cannot be diverted to universities just because this is where the focus of the protests was. This will only lead to neglect of other equally deserving sectors which can contribute to economic development.

Not only is funding to the various components of the South African education and training system a problem, but it mirrors the shape of the South African system – an inverted pyramid with a larger university sector than TVET or adult education, the opposite to the norm in most countries of the world. In this regard the Heher commission notes (2017:66) two major weaknesses in the South African system as being ‘the small proportion of college students as against students attending universities’ and ‘the number of unemployed and uneducated persons’.

The shape of the South African system in 2014, to scale, is depicted below (DHET, 2017b:52):

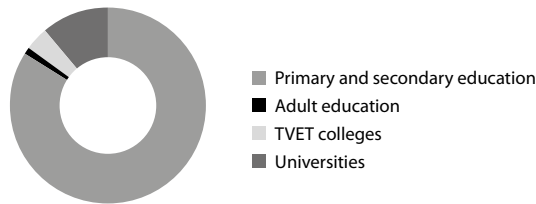
Figure 1: Shape of the post-school education and training system in South Africa, 2014



Source: DHET, 2017b

The proportions of the education budget for each component reflect even more strongly this post-school participation ‘inverted pyramid’.

Figure 2: Education expenditure estimates, 2015/2016



Source: DHET, 2017b

Underfunding of TVET colleges

In TVET colleges, the state funds 80% of college costs, while the other 20% is made up of student fees paid directly by students or by the state in the form of student loans. The state's 80% component has seldom been fully paid according to the funding formulas and, in recent years, the size of the cuts has increased, leaving the affected colleges with severe budget shortfalls (made worse by their growing student enrolments).

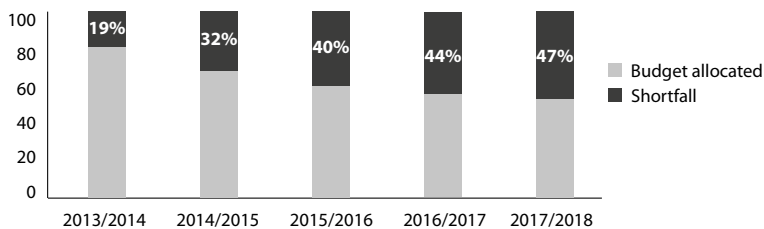
As an example, in 2013/2014, Treasury's total Medium-Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF) budget for TVET college education should have been R5.989 billion. However, the actual allocation budget was R4.845 billion.

TABLE 1: Estimated shortfalls in TVET college budgets: 2013/2014 to 2017/2018

	2013/2014	2014/2015	2015/2016	2016/2017	2017/2018
	R'000	R'000	R'000	R'000	R'000
Total budget required	5 989 000	8 569 656	10 218 558	11 580 733	12 885 164
Total budget allocated	4 845 000	5 827 173	6 179 574	6 513 122	6 838 778
Total shortfall	-1 144 000	-2 742 483	-4 038 984	-5 067 611	-6 046 386

Source: DHET, 2017b

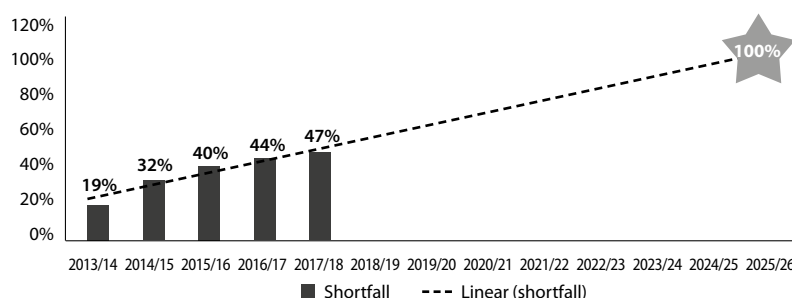
Figure 3: Estimated shortfalls in TVET college budgets (bar graphs)



Source: DHET 2017b

A trend line applied to this data shows an alarming (though one hopes impossible) projection, showing no money at all for TVET colleges by 2026!

Figure 4: Estimated shortfalls in TVET college budgets (trend line)



Source: DHET 2017b

These funding shortfalls need to be analysed in terms of both their general impact and their specific impact on TVET colleges in certain provinces.

First, the shortfalls render virtually impossible the expansion of TVET college provision to attain the growth goals set out by the DHET and the National Planning Commission (NPC) (DHET, 2012a, 2012b, 2013a, 2013b, 2015; NPC, 2012:319, 321–322).

TABLE 2: Estimated growth goals by 2030

Institutions (public and private)	2013 enrolment	DHET target: 2030	NPC target: 2030
TVET colleges	654 240	4 000 000	1 250 000
PALCs/community colleges	266 139		1 000 000
Totals	920 379	4 000 000	2 250 000

Source: DHET 2013a, 2015; NPC, 2012

The argument for this expansion is clearly set out in the report of the *Ministerial committee on the review of the funding frameworks of TVET colleges and CET colleges* (DHET, 2017a):

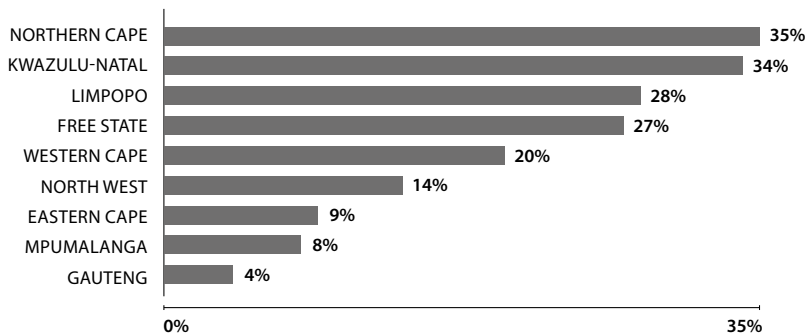
In the economic development context in South Africa, the role of technical and vocational education and training is particularly crucial to the development of the country's manufacturing sector which at this point is seriously underdeveloped given the country's level of development. Moreover, one of the major constraints to the development of a manufacturing sector and a productive export strategy is the lack of 'middle level' skills in terms of technicians of various kinds, welders, plumbers, etc.

In addition, the reality is that TVET colleges (and more so PALCs/community colleges) serve students who are more disadvantaged (economically and educationally) than those who enrol at universities.

Secondly, the impasse created by the general funding shortfall is exacerbated by the continuing situation that funding for TVET colleges in different provinces is not being based upon a fair share of the national budget available but on the historical baseline funding carried over from the time when the TVET colleges were provincially funded.

The shortfalls in the provincial budgets needed to fund programme enrolments fully (funded full-time equivalents, or FTEs) and the percentage of unfunded FTE students are shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Programme budget shortfalls by province – 2012/2013



Source: DHET, 2017b

In the TVET colleges in KwaZulu-Natal, for example, the shortfall has been growing incrementally. In 2011/2012, the shortfall was R201 528 971; in 2012/2013, it was R459 207 247; and in 2013/2014, it was R943 852 306. The impact of this is described as follows (DHET, 2017b:87):

Currently the KZN FET (TVET) colleges have to reduce, or not spend on essential items. These include investment in adequate staffing levels, student support, teaching materials and equipment, repairs and maintenance, etc. The consequence of this has been, and will be, poor pass rates, demotivated staff and students, deteriorating facilities and general under-performance. A further consequence will be the colleges' inability to further increase the number of enrolments and, therefore, not achieve the national growth targets as set in the minister's performance agreement. There may also be an overall decrease in total student numbers as the facilities continue to deteriorate.

As can be seen from the foregoing, the funding of the TVET colleges has been inequitable and insufficient. A fair distribution of funding would mean that the colleges would receive

equal rand values per weighted FTE student. Currently, the baseline used for the conditional grant reflects historical allocations to TVET colleges, which were very low in the Northern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, Free State and North West provinces. However, redistributing the pool of available funding equitably to all provinces would disadvantage colleges in provinces where, in the past, more appropriate budgets were allocated to TVET colleges. A more acceptable way to correct these imbalances would be to secure additional top-up funding, which could be channelled to the colleges in the provinces that have historically been severely underfunded.

Underfunding of community colleges (adult education)

State-run adult education has always been poorly funded since the state-run night schools, called adult education centres or adult learning centres, or most recently PALCs, were reopened in 1977 (after their forced closure in the 1950s by the apartheid state). They were run through 13 of the various late apartheid-era education departments, then through the 9 post-apartheid provincial education departments, until finally they became the responsibility of the DHET in 2009. They gained some measure of legal identity with the Adult Basic Education and Training Act of 2000, but, with the abolition of the Act in 2013 and in terms of the Further Education and Training College Amendment Act of 2013, they were (by legal fiat on 1 April 2015) nominally merged into nine community colleges (DHET, 2017b:219–249). State-funded literacy campaigns were mooted in post-apartheid South Africa and were made presidential lead projects. But these were unfunded mandates and the private sector did not come to the rescue. However, in 2008, the well-planned Kha Ri Gude literacy campaign started and received about R4 billion in funding until its closure in 2016/2017. Unfortunately, its graduates were not successful in being provided with follow-up.

To achieve change in the funding of adult education, the only approach that makes sense is that a benchmark is set for the proportion of the national education budget that is awarded to adult education and training. Currently, the 0.7% allocation is derisory. Internationally, there has been advocacy for adult education to obtain at least 5% of education budgets, though few reach a 3% benchmark and it is generally below 1% in Africa, with mid-2000s exceptions such as Nigeria (2.43%), Mozambique (3.5%) and Cape Verde (8.7%) (Aitchison & Alidou, 2009:14–15). Ideally, as an interim measure, the overall budget should be increased immediately to 1.5% of the national education budget (a longer-term goal would be from 2.5% to 5%) and that certain percentages of the budget should be ring-fenced for personnel costs (including coordination), curriculum and materials, maintenance, and monitoring and evaluation (DHET, 2017b:245).

Education policy formulations in South Africa generally try to meet popular demands for equality. Scarce resources, however, have led to policy implementation choosing otherwise, even when the long-term consequences are known to be dire. Unless there is an *educated, informed* citizenry – one materially provided for by an economy that makes things for and

provides services to *all* the population – that has real agency in society, the majority of the young people of South Africa will remain on the road to the education dumping grounds.

Grasping the nettle

The under-resourcing of TVET and adult and community education has long been entrenched. The situation could conceivably deteriorate further if the university sector, in spite of its legitimate demands, continues to be funded at the expense of TVET and community colleges, which serve particularly disadvantaged sections of the population. The position will be exacerbated if that redistribution is made on the basis of short-term, populist political interests.

A better vision of what a vibrant TVET college and community college sector could look like is possible: the recent discussion document, *The ideal institutional model for community colleges in South Africa* (Land & Aitchison, 2017), provides an example of such a positive outlook for the sector.

The ‘shape’ of the post-school system must change if the government is to meet the variety of needs of a large proportion of the country’s youths and adults. But the problems are of such a nature that tinkering with short-term ameliorative changes will not work; indeed, they will simply cause more pain in the long run – a case of merely stroking the nettle. Only boldly grasping the nettle will do.

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