
Interview with Adrienne Bird

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Introduction and background

Adrienne Bird played a seminal role in skills development in South Africa, and she did so across a broad canvas. I was fortunate to capture an interview I conducted with her in August 2017, two years after she had been diagnosed with acute myeloid leukaemia. She was in remission at the time and working for the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET).

Adrienne was a major architect in the design of South Africa's skills development strategy during the 1990s. Through her involvement in the trade union movement, she was instrumental in South Africa becoming one of the first countries to adopt a National Qualifications Framework (NQF). She also had a hand in the creation of sector education and training authorities (SETAs). Then, after the DHET was established in 2009, she played a role in the formation of the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) as its first chief executive officer (CEO). From then on, she played a lesser-known, but nonetheless critical, role in identifying the skills required by the multitude of infrastructure projects that the National Infrastructure Plan was formulating. In addition, she worked with industry to raise the quality of skills training at technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges through the Centres of Specialisation. She clarifies what all this entailed in the interview below.

Adrienne's involvement with worker education and training began in 1985, when she was appointed the Transvaal educator of the Metal and Allied Workers' Union (MAWU). In 1987, MAWU merged with other unions in the metal and motor industries to form the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA). She was given the assignment to formulate

a skills development strategy for NUMSA. From 1988 to 1990, she underwent a mind-shift about industrial training and skills for workers when she was invited to the Metal Industry Training Board and saw how it trained workers. She then set up a Research Development Group with which she went on international learning missions. What they learned in Australia from its Metalworkers Union was most impressive. The group subsequently developed a strategy for education and training that eventually gave birth to the NQF.

In 1990, Adrienne became NUMSA's full-time national training coordinator. With the Research Development Group, she developed a strategy for black workers to receive industrial training in order for them to be appointed into more skilled occupations with higher earnings. The training was to be formalised so that workers would gain a certificate for every course they passed. The goal was that all forms of discrimination had to be removed. In 1991, COSATU adopted NUMSA'S strategy and made Adrienne its representative on the National Training Board that advised the Minister of Manpower on training.¹

I was particularly interested in hearing directly from Adrienne whether the intention in establishing SETA learnerships was to, in time, do away with apprenticeship training. This was borne out by the decline in apprenticeship training and qualified artisans after the Skills Development Act was passed in 1998. Although there had been a decline in the number of apprentices qualifying as artisans over the preceding 10 years, the numbers declined further by almost 50%, from 4 950 to 2 550 from 1998 to 2004.²

Two years after the interview below was conducted, Adrienne Bird sadly succumbed to myeloid leukaemia, a life tragically cut short. Publishing this interview is a tribute to Adrienne and her strong commitment to advancing skills development in South Africa.

Adrienne in her own words

JOHANN: Adrienne, I want you to start right at the beginning ...

ADRIENNE: Okay. I started with the unions close on 30 years ago. And the issue for the unions was: How do you get access for workers who have a poor education base? We learnt a lot from the Aussies, the Australian Metal Workers' Union, and they developed something called a national qualification framework for Australia, and what we liked about it is it gave a stepped approach to learning.

So, we built on that, saying that workers will then be able to incrementally improve their general education capability, but not in an academic fashion,

1 Kally Forrest. 2011. *Metal that will not bend: National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa 1980–1995*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 56, 216–218, 250–253.

2 Andre Kraak. 2008. Three pathways to intermediate skilling. In A Kraak & K Press (Eds). *Human resources development review 2008*. Cape Town: HSRC Press, 22(1):487.

in a work-related fashion. Many workers had learnt the skills on the job; they were doing the work, but they hadn't had the theory. They often had literacy problems. The idea was to have this aggressive thing. We developed the proposal for the NQF in South Africa and that came into being with the SAQA Act [South African Qualifications Authority Act] in 1995.

Then I, as a trade unionist in NUMSA, sat as a rep on five industry training boards. The main one was the metal board, which was initially called the Metal Engineering Industry's Artisan Trading Board. It was just artisans. Anyway, it changed to become the Metal Engineering Industry's Education and Training Board, which was broader, and we started to make inroads.

Then 1994 came and we said, 'Let's build on where we have got to. Let's take these industry training boards, but turn them into sector education training boards, SETAs, and let's put them right across the economy.' It was an unusually open period in our country and people allowed that to happen. I mean, today, I don't think you'd get away with it, or a national levy. The levy was negotiated, the sector bodies were set up, this time with a much broader mandate to look at all the work levels, and so on.

And then the question came, 'How do you hold this massive organisational energy together?' It was agreed that we would establish a national skills development strategy. And the aim of the strategy was to identify certain priority areas that all of these structures should address in their sectoral spaces.

But, remember, there was a big divide between the Department of Labour and the Department of Education at the time. It's only beginning to heal now, a big weakness. Our focus was initially on the number of employers that submitted workplace skills plans. They could get a mandatory grant back if they submitted these plans. Initially that grant back was 50%, so it was huge. It's since been cut back. Then there was a discretionary amount, which was the interpretation of these national priorities in the sector, things like the number of learnerships, the number of young people, and so on.

It started getting going. There was a sort of momentum. The learnerships started taking off and so on, but I left in 2005 and at that time they were negotiating the second NSDSII [National Skills Development Strategy II] with employers, which was a slightly broader exercise. I wasn't directly involved with NSDSII. Then there was NSDSIII [National Skills Development Strategy III] and that's the one that's currently being worked on. NSDSIII talks about the need for a skills-planning mechanism and

it talks about plugging lots of gaps, like giving university students and college students workplace learning opportunities, helping with lecturer development, and so on. It's got a whole lot of different pieces that it's looking at. So you can see the influence of the new department in the NSDSIII.

Now, your next question?

JOHANN: Learnerships, apprenticeships and artisans. I can appreciate why you lifted the others up, but was there ever an intention to phase out apprenticeships and artisans and to replace them with learnerships?

ADRIENNE: No.

JOHANN: Not?

ADRIENNE: Well, the idea was to give workers an opportunity to get to artisan level. Artisan was the kind of target. Because the workers that were in NUMSA, where I was at the time, were thinking much beyond artisan, you know, thinking technician or technologist or engineer. It was too far a jump. Our focus was here and now, how do we get to artisan?

JOHANN: Artisan, okay.

ADRIENNE: But when we looked at legislative issues, we never repealed the Manpower Training Act sections that dealt with artisans.

It wasn't ever our intention to do away with it. It was to offer another route: you could either do the traditional apprenticeship or you could do a learnership which would take you to the same place.

It's been misunderstood generally, because people said, 'Oh, you tried to do away with artisans.' It was never the case. And as evidence, we never changed the Manpower Training Act, which had all the apprenticeship stuff in it, the traditional apprenticeship. We merely complemented it with learnership stuff.

That has been misunderstood. And the NQF that came up was very novel at that stage, because now NQF exists everywhere you look. We were one of the first countries, not the first, because the Aussies were ahead of us.

And it was quite interesting: we negotiated the new National Skills Development Strategy under what was then called the National Training Board. In 1992 I was a rep on the National Training Board

and at that board we were negotiating the new skills dispensation. It was just another of those negotiation sites that were happening all over the place at that time. And it turned into the NQF we'd woken up to in 1989, all because of our partnership with the Metal Workers' Union in Australia and their trainers. Then we pulled them back and said, 'Come and help us.'

When we were doing all this work, it turned out that the employers were doing similar work. So there was resonance with the employers. We got agreement and that was what triggered the work into the department. The new Minister of Labour accepted the results of those negotiations as the basis for his policy.

JOHANN: And did he have very different plans or were they in line with what you were thinking?

ADRIENNE: What did happen is that we set out the SETAs in order to open up the pathways for workers with the learnership idea coming from the NQF debates. But what we inadvertently did – and we never intended to do it, but it was a consequence of what we did – we created these silos, economic sectoral silos. The consequence was that we started to get qualifications being developed that were unique to the sector, but often having the same title: you'd have an electrician for the mining industry, an electrician for local government, an electrician for ..., and so on. I think there was something like (I don't remember exactly), like 15 different electrician qualifications. Whereas historically there had been one electrician, now we had 15 electrician qualifications. This sectoral character of the qualifications became a problem because there wasn't nice mobility across the sectors.

JOHANN: Just to pursue this a little bit. Each sector does have, could have, different sets of skills that are required, that are not transferable but are unique to that sector?

ADRIENNE: Ja, there are some, but we needed both. For the big artisans we needed national qualifications, and it was the push for national qualifications that led to the development of the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) in 2010.

JOHANN: One of the problems I've heard about the QCTO is that there are more than 1 000 occupations, but only about a 100 of them have been properly spelled out. There is this enormous backlog that is going to take years to fill. That's the kind of criticism I'm hearing. Is that valid?

ADRIENNE: The question is really: ‘What’s the aim?’ And I must tell you there is a debate going on. What I say to you might not be the view that everyone shares, but the thing that we started working on in Labour is the development of something called the Organising Framework for Occupations, the OFO. It’s a classification system of occupations. StatsSA has always had one. It was based on the International Labour Organization (ILO). They called it SASCO, South African Standard Classification of Occupations. We played with that and we started learning again from the Aussies and the New Zealanders as well as the ILO, which was working with them at the time. The aim was to come up with a new classification system that was more aligned to skill profiles.

The original SASCO was just a description of occupational titles and their relationship to one another. The new one was to give some sense of the skill that was embedded in each of those occupations. And in that occupation profile a classification system was developed in which there are 1 500 occupations. If you look at this through the lens from where I’m located now – the public education and training providers such as the colleges or the universities – that’s probably way too many.

Then we looked at the German system. That makes it easier because the Germans have got somewhere around 300 what they call professions, which we call occupations. And that’s it. What they do is they go for broad occupations that give excellent mobility. They have this very strong social dialogue, a social partnership with arrangements at every level. They reach agreement on these very general occupational qualifications which are then published in their *Government Gazette*.

There is quite a push now to reduce the number of occupations down from the 1 500 to something that’s more manageable. So, the distinction between job and occupation becomes an important one. At the moment we’re trying to address the sectoral character of what was developed under Labour, the SETA story, and at the same time trying to get these more generic occupations.

What happened is, there was such a divide between the Departments of Labour and Education that they didn’t talk to each other, hey.

JOHANN: Sad.

ADRIENNE: Part of it was institutional and part of it goes to the fundamentals of what some people think of as education and what other people think of as useful training. Those on the education side thought you must be a problem-

solver and you must be a citizen of the world and you must question this and that. And then those of us sitting in Labour said, 'Yes, but who is going to fix the geyser when it breaks?'

What they called the NATED, National Accredited Technical Education Diploma courses, N-courses, were to be phased out completely by Education and replaced by something called the NC(V), the National Certificate (Vocational). And that was designed to have no workplace learning at all and to give people the sort of general introduction to a field of learning. But then they found out what happens to the learners: the universities didn't want them because they didn't have enough theory, and industry didn't want them because they didn't have enough practical.

So this NC(V) sits like a pudding in the middle, you know?

JOHANN: Now there is a muddle?

ADRIENNE: Ja, there is a muddle. When 2009 came along and skills were transferred to – were combined with – Education, that section of Labour was moved across to Education. At that time the director-general pulled me back in.

JOHANN: When did you come back into DHET?

ADRIENNE: 2009, when it was established. In 2012 the president announced the National Infrastructure Plan. It was the big infrastructure programmes which were intended to lay the foundation for economic growth, crowd and private-sector investment, all that good stuff.

The minister of higher education was given the job of ensuring that the skills required for that were provided. He set up a Special Projects Unit. I had been acting CEO for QCTO from 2010 to 2012, then somebody else got the job and I went to the Special Projects Unit. Basically, what we've been doing is we've been spending a fairly long time, till September 2014, developing a tool to understand what skills are required for these infrastructure projects.

We really did considerable work. We developed an electronic tool where one can go from the projects and the skills required for each project to elevating them and getting a picture across all of the projects. There are something like 2 000 infrastructure projects, a dam here, Medupi there, roads here and there, new schools and new universities, and all that.

We analysed the skills that are needed for each project type and we produced a typical skills set for a project type. Then we established the number of

projects in each project type. With some technical expertise we came up with a National Skills List, that is, a list of priority skills. We came up with about 94 of them, but then we struggled because at the time there was no way of translating the National Skills List that we had into the planning functions of the universities and the colleges.

Universities are quite protective of how they do things, and the branch that oversees them was nervous about being prescriptive. We circulated to the universities what skills were needed and there were some responses.

But in the college space at the Intermediate Level, what we did was we said we wanted to train more artisans and we extracted from the list that we had 13 priority ones. Then it was a case of how do we develop them? It was a case of either we dealt with traditional sectoral-based learnerships, and so on, or we used the new QCTO qualifications and tried to do it that way. We developed a very big project focusing on these 13 trades, but aiming to build the capacity of the colleges together with industry to build these skills. That's what I'm doing now. I'm driving this project and we're working closely with industry.

JOHANN: Is this going to take another three years? How long is it going to take, because it sounds excellent to me?

ADRIENNE: Well, I can put in timelines. We hope all the evaluations will be done by the end of August and that the DG [director-general] will approve them by the end of September and we'll issue awards on 3 October 2017.

JOHANN: Fantastic!

ADRIENNE: We're working with these industry groups now. They are effectively leading the new evaluations.

JOHANN: I was recently invited by a college to go to three campuses and the uniform cry in the motor trade and in fitting and turning is, 'Look here, we sit with this old technology. And we know we're training our students on obsolete machinery no longer used by industry.'

ADRIENNE: Look, there are two solutions to that. One is to buy, try and buy, but it's immensely expensive and they can only be equipped with basic stuff. It's the partnership with industry that's so important. What they've done in Germany is they create shared centres where a number of colleges would send apprentices because it's just too expensive to do it at every college. In Germany it's led by industry. It's this link that's so important.

JOHANN: Yes. Is industry coming to the party?

ADRIENNE: Well, I can't give you a real answer yet. What I can say is that we've got one of the major employer associations on board. It is a major player in what we're doing ...

What was interesting is that many of these associations have never tendered for anything before. Some of them just haven't applied. So we've also had to make some compromises.

That's what I spend most of my time on. And in the other part of my time we have entered into what we call 'protocol agreements' which specify intergovernmental relations. If a national department is partnering with a provincial department, for instance, it's called a protocol.

And the methodology that we developed we call the 21-step process of determining what projects there are, what skills are required, how you hand over information about what's required to the colleges and universities, and so on. That methodology we've made the foundation of this agreement between ourselves and the offices of the premiers in the provinces. What they're doing is looking at their own provincial growth and development plans, which is infrastructure but often also other kinds of strategic project.

We've done a lot of work with KwaZulu-Natal. And they're looking at their SIP (Strategic Integrated Project). They're applying our methodology to all of those projects to derive skills lists and to put agreements in place with the universities and the colleges. It looks like we're about to start with Limpopo. Others have expressed interest. Western Cape does its own thing, more or less, which is fine. North West has shown interest. We've got five agreements with five different offices of the premiers.

But I think, you know, from your interest about the link between skills and work, this was an example of how we've tried to take it to scale. We tried to say, 'Look at your total strategy,' because I'm a strong believer in the notion that occupation takes precedence over sector wherever possible. It gives the youngsters the best possible employment opportunities if you make them flexible. Remember what those employers do: they advertise for qualified people in the main. If they need an electrician, they'll advertise for an electrician and they'll expect that person to demonstrate they've passed a trade test. It's the state's job, I think, to ensure there is generic training that enables people to enter that kind of occupation. I mean, the private sector, if they want an engineer, they recruit an engineer who is qualified so that the employers can trust the skill when they buy it.

JOHANN: One of the complaints at the college [I visited] was that industry has all the latest equipment for training, but they're training only a small handful.

ADRIENNE: Well, what we're exploring is what we call Centres of Specialisation Projects in 13 trades. We're looking both at building the capacity of the colleges, but in certain cases entering into partnerships with private training centres to provide the practical training because we'll never be able to afford that kind of equipment to scale. But then we've got to look for a financing model, which makes it attractive to the partnering company and to the college.

And just by the way, I spent four years researching the history of the apprenticeship system in South Africa.

JOHANN: Wow!

ADRIENNE: Because of the leukaemia I'm planning to retire and I thought I wanted to write this history. I'm sitting with a draft and I want to do something with it because I've done extensive work. I did it through interviews with people, in the main. Truly, I've gone back a hundred years. So maybe there is a way in which I can publish it.