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### **UNDERSTANDING POLICY INTENTIONS IS CRITICAL FOR SUCCESSFUL POLICY IMPLEMENTATION WITHIN THE TECHNICAL AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING COLLEGE'S SECTOR**

#### **Abstract**

Public policy implementation is frequently regarded as problematic globally and reasons for these vary. In particular, the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector has been criticized for lack of delivery and most of the criticism is directed towards the non-implementation of government policy. In South Africa managers of TVET colleges are at the forefront of this process. Practices at these colleges could thus be interpreted in the context of management practices. Moyo (2008) suggests that the success or failure of policy could at least partly be attributed to the role that policy implementers play.

South African policies are regarded as among the best in the world, however their implementation is still a challenge. Capacity of policy implementers and their understanding of policy intentions are critical for successful policy implementation. Capacity involves the ability of implementers to identify, eliminate and obviate policy implementation challenges and their understanding and knowledge to support decision making during policy implementation. This paper interrogated the understanding of policy originators and implementers of TVET policies and found that both these respondents had a common understanding of policy intentions. In addition it was found from respondents that the capacity to take decision is critical for policy implementation.

This paper concludes that policy implementation is dependent on developed policy and capacity to take decisions. It is important for college managers to both understand policy intentions as well as have the capacity to take decisions if policy implementation is the goal.

Key words: policy implementation, policy intentions, TVET college, college management, understanding policy, transformation

#### **Introduction**

Since 1994 South Africa has developed numerous legislative documents to spearhead transformation of its society. These include the *National Education Policy Act* (27 of 1996); *South African Schools Act* (84 of 1996); *the Constitution* (Act 108 of 1996); the *Further Education and Training Act* (98 of 1998) all attest to this. These point to a clear transformation agenda of the economic and social systems of South Africa. At its 2007 Polokwane Conference the African National Congress (ANC) recommitted the government to this agenda and education was one of the five critical areas identified. In his 2010 State of the Address President Zuma emphasized the importance of implementing government education policies (RSA, 2010).

The Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) college sector in South Africa has been subjected to reforms since the dawn of democracy in 1994

and the release of the *Education White Paper 4* in 1998 started this process and the latest one is the *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training* introduced in 2014 (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2014). The intention of government by these reforms is to transform the college sector into a vibrant, high-quality and responsive system that will spearhead human resources development in South Africa. Despite these endeavors, the sector has continued to experience challenges ranging from curriculum reforms to finances, from learner throughputs to leadership and partnerships and they are all underpinned by policy imperatives that drive the transformation within this sector (McGrath, 1998; RSA, 1998a). In an attempt to address challenges facing the TVET college sector, in 2009 the Ministry of Higher Education and Training (MoHET) located the competency of TVET colleges under its wing.

This paper attempts to show that for transformation of the college sector to be successful, there should firstly be sound implementable policies juxtaposed with capacity at all levels to implement them.

### **Policy implementation**

Policy documents such as The Green Paper on Further Education and Training<sup>1</sup> (RSA, 1998a); the White Paper 4 (RSA, 1998b); the Further Education and Training Act (98 of 1998) and the Further Education and Training College's Act (16 of 2006) were developed to drive transformation of the college sector. The development of these policies set in motion the process of transforming the college sector. Many authors (Jansen, 2001; Lungu, 2001; Pandor, 2001) praise these policies as some of the best policies in the world. Sebele (2013) argues that developed and implemented policies should drive transformation, however studies refuted this and policy implementation remains a challenge (Makinde, 2005; CEPD, 2002; Jansen, 2001).

Roh (2012), Landsberg (2009), Sultana (2008) indicate that policy implementation is a complex process and this complexity is exacerbated when implementers struggle to understand intentions and plan accordingly. Makinde (2005) indicates that there are basic critical factors that are very crucial to implementing public policy which can alleviate implementation problems. Furthermore Roberts-Gray, Gingiss and Boerm (2007) define policy implementation as the "bridge" between a program and its impact on those it is intended for. They argue that no matter how effective policy development is, policy cannot produce its intended benefits until it is effectively integrated into actual procedures and practices at the site of implementation. Converting policy intentions into plans requires the understanding and knowledge of both policy intentions and policy implementation. Capacity is required capacity to implement government policies and this is a key element for the transformation process in South Africa.

Capacity in policy implementation concerns use of knowledge, advising, making intelligent choices, but more concerned with the ability of governments to make intelligent choices (Painter & Pierre, 2005; Parsons 2004). Painter and Pierre (2005) have questioned the ability of governments to ensure an appropriate flow of information, analysis and advice to decision-makers particularly around issues of policy implementation and delivery on one level, and whether on the other level the

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<sup>1</sup> In South Africa prior 2013 TVET was referred to as Further Education and Training.

public service has the requisite expertise, knowledge, skills and resources to support decision-making (Bakvis & Aucoin, 2005; Tiernan, 2006). In this regard Barzelay and Shvets (2006) profiled a capacitated manager as someone who is 'both technically competent and adept at interacting effectively across organizational boundaries'. A capacitated manager is driven by results and has the ability to identify and eliminate potential problems and mostly solve problems without elevating them to higher levels. A capacitated manager is policy results-driven and has the ability to identify, eliminate and obviate policy implementation challenges.

The success or failure of policy implementation is directly linked to the capacity and ability of policy implementers. Once policy has been developed and adopted for implementation, policy implementers need to develop college implementation plans based on policy intentions. According to the Education White Paper 4 (1998) there was dearth of capacity at the old technical colleges (RSA, 1998b) and this resulted in many TVET colleges faces challenges in implementing the new agenda. Successful transformation of the college sector depends largely on the **policies** that are initiated and developed by government and the **capacity** and knowledge of implementers to implement those policies at college level. A mathematical equation will show this as:

**Policy Implementation (PI) = developed policies (dp) + management capacity (mc).**

The equation above shows that developed policies and management capacity impact policy implementation directly. I indicated above that South African policies have been touted as some of the best in the world. This paper explores how capacity to implement policy influences policy implementation at TVET colleges in South Africa that this paper is focused.

## **Research methodology**

The study upon which this paper is based employed a qualitative research design using ethnographic interviews to collect data from seven purposefully selected respondents (Maxwell, 2009). The respondents are experts in policy origination and implementation. Two interview schedules were prepared and were constituted by questions selected in advance and extracted directly TVET policy documents.

The questions sought to solicit the understanding of key policy concepts and intentions from the informants (Flick, 2014). A portable audio recorder was used to record the interviews, which were more of discussions with the informants. Provision was made in each interview schedule for interview questions and comments. Probes characterized each interview to clarify certain responses in order to collect comprehensive data.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the study several strategies were used to analyze the collected data (Nieuwenhuis, 2006). Firstly, individual interview cases were summarized immediately after each interview. Afterwards each interview was transcribed, followed by another summary capturing key text passages to aid analysis. The last strategy involved identifying similarities and differences of content among all or some of the interviews. Codes were developed and allocated to phrases and concepts identified as similar using hermeneutics and content analysis to make meaning of textual data. The content was either a word or a

phrase or a paragraph that was used by the informants. It was important to understand the transcribed interview texts to get a clearer or better understanding of the informants' meaning of the phenomenon under investigation. The codes were used to look at data from different angles in order to be able to understand and interpret the raw data, and make inferences in an objective and systematic manner in order to identify specified characteristics of a message (Babbie & Mouton, 2004).

Certain characteristics of coded data revealed themes there were emerging from analyzed data and these themes were then analyzed. According to Harding (2013) thematic analysis focuses on identifiable themes and patterns of behavior of informants. This involved sifting and sorting through pieces of data to detect and interpret thematic categorization, search for inconsistencies and contradictions, and generate conclusions about what is happening and why in policy implementation. The process of building themes continued until there was no more possibility of new themes or categories emerging from the data.

Finally the themes were interpreted as they provided an explanation of policy implementation (Nieuwenhuis, 2006; McMillan & Schumacher, 1997). Both first- and second-order interpretation approaches were used. According to Neuman (2003) first-order interpretation is attached to an event, behaviour or action by the informant. First-order interpretations are meanings attached by the informant or informants. Second-order interpretation was carried by the researcher to try and understand the interpretations as presented by the informants and attached his meanings to them and the method of comparative analysis was used for this purpose. Interpretations or meanings of individual informant were compared with perceived meanings of other informants and then finally the researcher reconstructed the interpretations of the first order. These interpretations helped the study to make conclusions about the research topic.

## **Findings**

This paper sought to show how the understanding of policy intentions and management capacity impacts policy implementation. The understanding of policy originators and policy implementers of the TVET policy intentions was found to be common. The study upon which this paper is based found no major contradictions amongst the respondents with regards policy intentions. The study established that the policy development process is rigorous process and yield good policies with clear intentions that are understood by both policy originators and implementers. The findings reveal that managers at college level have an understanding and knowledge of government transformation agenda captured in TVET policies and are competent to interact with government policy; although policy originators also felt that college managers lack management skills to implement policy.

Policy originators and implementers agreed that policy implementation is guided by authority to make decisions. They indicated that it is desirable that key policy implementation decisions need to be taken at different levels if effectiveness and efficiency are the guiding principles. Policy originators indicated that policy implementation decisions at central level enables the Department of Higher Education to put control measures on the college environment to ensure that colleges address national needs and goals. In this regard decisions such as determining

national priorities that TVET colleges should implement should be centralized at national level.

In addition policy originators argued that centralized policy implementation decisions ensures that colleges as well as other levels of the department account to some top level authority. Policy and policy priorities are the prerogative of the national Department of Education and in terms of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa; TVET colleges are the implementer of this policy priorities. Colleges should plan for implementation and report its progress in this regard to DHET. A centralized policy implementation decision ensures that work is done and done according to the centrally developed plan.

In addition policy originators felt that although centralized implementation decisions are important, policy implementers need to be afforded opportunities to make decisions that affect their colleges directly. They also expressed the feeling that the type colleges should not turned into slaves that work on the master's decisions but rather should take implementation decisions at their levels. In this regard policy originators expressed that this is likely to ensure successful implementation of national policies at a sites of implementation.

Policy implementers indicated felt they have capacity and know-how to implement policy and expressed the need for them to be afforded increased decision-making authority for this purpose. These policy implementers felt that colleges are meant to serve their communities and therefore their plans should reflect and address community needs and this is not possible if implementation decisions are taken at another level. Policy implementers felt that if decisions are taken at a level that is removed from the communities, then it becomes very difficult to implement policies that seek to address their needs and demands.

Policy originators also felt that for policy to be successfully implemented at TVET colleges, colleges managers needed to be capacitated. They indicated that capacity building programs and workshops should be organized for policy implementers as these will ensure that managers implement national policy from an informed background.

## **Conclusion**

The transformation agenda for the TVET college sector should be driven by the implementation of government policy intentions. Role players should understand government policy intentions as captured in policy documents so that they can understand clearly the intentions of policy and develop and implement plans accordingly as this is critical for successful policy implementation.

This paper concludes that policy implementation decisions are important and implementers should be given power to take decisions at the site of implementation to ensure relevance to community needs.

There is a need to decentralize power to implementation sites so that implementation decisions can be taken at this level.

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