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Educational solutions to improve the employability of senior high school learners

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The new political dispensation and socio-economic transformation in South Africa do not, unfortunately, guarantee jobs for those who wish to enter the labour market after school. Indications are that only between 5–7% of successful Grade 12 candidates in the country find employment in the formal sector. The problem of unemployment and ways to improve the employability of learners therefore need to be urgently addressed. Reasons for the low employability levels of new entrants to the labour market include the structural change in the economy towards a more knowledge-based service sector; the lack of entrepreneurial skills and orientation among new entrants to create new business; and teachers with low morale who do not actively prepare learners for the job market. Strategies to increase the employability of learners include the successful implementation of the new FET curriculum from 2006 with the aim of increasing the employability of learners exiting in 2008, by encouraging a more learner-centred and activity-based approach to education; teachers who are well informed regarding current requirements in the labour market and prepare their learners accordingly; and continuous involvement by the private sector in the design of curriculum.

Introduction

The new political dispensation, which gave rise to the socio-cultural and socio-economic transformation that has been taking place in South Africa since the first democratic elections in 1994, does not, unfortunately, guarantee jobs for those who wish to enter the labour market after school. Notwithstanding the improved Grade 12 pass rate in recent years, matriculants are discouraged by newspaper headings which indicate that only between 5–7% of successful candidates find employment in the formal sector (Van Eeden, 2004:3), i.e. in organised, regulated and registered economic activities.

Various reasons are given for this situation. It is argued that learners are ill-prepared for the modern world of work, putting the blame on teachers and the schooling system for not preparing learners adequately in terms of the specific job skills required. Other arguments are that the South African economy simply does not create sufficient numbers of job opportunities; whilst affirmative action and other reasons such as increased mechanisation are also mentioned. This being the situation, the problem of unemployment and ways to improve the employability of learners need to be addressed urgently.

Aim

The main aim in this article is to present possible reasons for the low employability levels of new entrants to the labour market. Also to recommend educational strategies that need to be implemented to increase the overall employability of South African learners who enter the job market after school or those who plan to first study at a tertiary institution. The concept 'learners' refers specifically to senior learners in the Further Education and Training (FET) band; in other words Grades 10–12 pupils in the South African schooling system.

Explanation of concepts

The meaning of the following labour-market related terms and concepts used in the article are given below:

Economically active population refers to people over the age of 15 (the compulsory education age in terms of the South African Schools Act) who are willing and able to work. The concept 'economically active population' is also perceived as the total labour force in the economy, as it includes the total number of people who can work and want to work, who are therefore either employed or unemployed

Entrepreneurs are people who see opportunities and are willing to take risks by supplying goods and services in the expectation that these will be sold at a profit (Mohr & Fourie, 2004: 28). They are risk-bearers who take chances and play an innovative role in addressing unemployment by creating jobs for themselves and others.

Formal sector refers to formally organised, regulated and registered economic activities that are undertaken in the formal market and recorded in the national accounts. The national accounts include a wide spectrum of financial indicators such as the Gross Domestic Product, Gross National Product and Gross Domestic Expenditure. People active in the formal sector are registered with the South African Revenue Service (SARS) and pay tax on their personal and business income.

Informal sector (sometimes also called the shadow economy, unrecorded economy, underground economy or hidden economy) refers to economic activities that are not officially recorded in the national accounts, in other words, the statistically unrecorded part of the economy. The three primary reasons why people find themselves in the informal economy are (Mohr & Fourie, 2004:345):

- They cannot find employment in the formal sector;
- They are engaged in illegal activities; or
- They do not want to pay tax.

Jobless growth refers to a situation where no new jobs are created in net terms although a positive economic growth rate is experienced. This is because more machines ('capital intensive production methods') rather than human labour ('labour intensive production methods') are employed to do the work.

Labour absorption capacity refers to the percentage of new entrants to the labour market who find a job in the formal sector of the economy (Barker, 2003:91).

Learners refers, for the purposes of this article, specifically to senior learners in the FET band; in other words Grade 10–12 pupils in the South African schooling system.

Structural unemployment occurs when there is a mismatch between worker qualifications and the skills required to do a specific job, or when jobs disappear because of technological changes in the economy (Mohr & Fourie, 2004:564).

Methodology

This article is based on research that combined literature and an empirical study. The aim of the empirical study was twofold. The first aim was to identify the main problems (skill shortages) which recruitment centres in industry encounter when they interview and/or employ new entrants. This process formed part of a bigger study on the automotive industry, funded by the National Research Foundation (NRF), to determine the skill shortages of suppliers in the industry. Information was gathered by means of personal interviews held with selected recruitment staff members at each of the four motor vehicle assemblers and at 20 of the bigger motor component suppliers in the Eastern Cape province, who were identified by the four motor vehicle assemblers. These contact persons were recommended by management in the respective organisations, where they are employed for their experience and expert knowledge in the fields of logistics and supply chain management. Those interviewed included engineers, administrative staff, different levels of managers, as well as technical and computer staff — thus a wide spectrum of workers who are generally found in industry.

The second aim of the empirical research was to determine how second- and third-year tertiary students at the former Port Elizabeth Technikon, currently known as the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU), perceived their readiness for the labour market. A questionnaire was used to gather this information. The questionnaire focused on students registered for courses that required experiential training, in other words, students who needed to do practical work for specific periods in relevant jobs to complete their qualifications. A total of 455 questionnaires were completed by students at this institution who were registered for the following national diplomas: Tourism, Marketing, Logistics, and Inventory and Stores Management.

Before commencing with the survey the questionnaire was evaluated for non-ambiguity, relevancy, transparency, general validity and interpretation. The final format of the questionnaire was decided upon after the research team was satisfied that it had been properly adapted for the specific objectives of the study. Because of the nature of the questionnaire, the Windows-based SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software package was used. This software package is a complete package that is used to enter, analyse, graphically display, and report information. This computer package also allows the user to capture open-ended questions as they appear on the questionnaire.

In order to minimise the measurement errors associated with a one-shot survey of this nature and to verify the authenticity of the gathered information, it was decided to run as many cross-tabulations as possible. The data obtained in this study can therefore be considered reliable, as every precaution was taken to ensure that questions were clearly understood before the responses were recorded. The responses obtained were tabulated and they are interpreted and discussed in the article. The discussion relates to the information obtained from both empirical studies.

Background notes on unemployment in South Africa

Unemployment is without doubt the major economic problem facing South African society today, and is perceived to be directly responsible for the high levels of socio-economic problems such as crime, violence and poverty (Barker, 2003:3). Similar to most developing countries, a major reason for unemployment in South Africa is the combination of an increasing labour force and insufficient economic growth. The increased labour force is caused by a high

population growth rate, a sharp increase in the participation rate of women in recent years, and a high influx of both legal and illegal migrants from neighbouring countries (Barker, 2003:4).

To make matters worse, the labour absorption capacity of the economy, i.e. the percentage of new entrants to the labour market who find a job in the formal sector, is falling. This rate was calculated at 12.5% for the 1980s, compared with a rate of 73.6% in the late 1960s (Barker, 2003:91). This means that whereas the South African economy succeeded in providing jobs to almost three out of every four new entrants to the formal job market in the 1960s and part of the 1970s, the figure decreased drastically to only one out of every eight new entrants in the 1980s. All indications are that this rate has decreased even further since the 1990s and may even be negative, as there is currently no net take-up of new job seekers. It has in fact been found that almost two million jobs were lost over the last two decades in South Africa (Barker, 2003:5). The main reasons for these losses include the trend that labour is being replaced by capital (equipment and machinery) as a result of new technology; the fact that the export sector has become more capital and skill intensive in order for South African exports to be internationally more competitive; and the demand for higher wages which reduces the demand for labour. In the most recent (September 2003) Labour Force Survey published by Statistics South Africa, the labour absorption capacity for the total economy (the formal and informal sectors combined) was estimated at only 38.8%, the lowest figure ever recorded (Van Tonder, 2004: 14).

This state of affairs — that no new jobs are created in net terms although a positive economic growth rate is experienced — is referred to as 'jobless growth' (Mohr & Fourie, 2004: 571). It is estimated that an economic growth rate of at least 5.4% per annum is required just to accommodate new entrants to the South African labour market, without even addressing the massive unemployment backlogs that have built up over the last few years (Barker, 2003:94). With the average annual economic growth rate in South Africa since the 1990s being less than 3%, it is obvious why it is so important for learners to be adequately educated and trained in terms of the specific skills required by the labour market.

The general lack of skills in South Africa

Closely linked to the unemployment problem, is the problem of skill shortages experienced in South Africa. For this reason the Skills Development Planning Unit (SDPU) was established in 1999. Its main function is to research and analyse the South African labour market to determine the skills development needs for the country as a whole, as well as for each sector of the economy (Skills Development Planning Unit, 2002:1). The SDPU is located within the Department of Labour and was established in terms of the Skills Development Act (No. 97 of 1998). Information gathered by the SDPU is made available to the Minister of Education, the National Skills Authority, Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs), and education and training providers.

In a labour force survey undertaken by Statistics South Africa in February 2001, the SDPU found that only 2.4 million people, or 14.9% of the country's economically active population of 16.1 million, had received any training in skills that are useful for the world of work. 'Economically active population' refers to people over the age of 15 — the compulsory education age in terms of the Schools Act — who are willing and able to work. 'Skill' in this context relates to the performance of, or competency associated with, the undertaking of a particular task or activity. The Green Paper, Skills Development Strategy for Economic and

Employment Growth in South Africa, defines 'skills' as "the necessary competencies that can be expertly applied in a particular context for a defined purpose" (Skills Development Planning Unit, 2002:1). The Green Paper emphasises that the following three competencies or skills need to be in place in order for a person to be better prepared for the world of work:

- Practical competence: the ability to perform a set of tasks;
- Foundational competence: the ability to understand what we, or others, are doing and why; and
- Reflective competence: the ability to integrate or connect our performance with an understanding of the performance of others, so that we can learn from our actions and be able to adapt to changes and unforeseen circumstances.

These three competencies or skills make it possible for citizens to continually improve upon their performance, help their organisations develop, and contribute constructively towards the establishment and growth of a learning nation.

As a positive sign, the same labour force survey (Skills Development Planning Unit, 2002:2) found that there is an increasing awareness among South African businesses of the importance and advantages of job-related education and on-the-job training.

It is important to note that the stock of a country's skills (or its human capital levels) is also affected by factors other than the output from the formal education system, or the training and development taking place in the workplace. There is growing evidence and concern that skilled people in the formal sector are becoming increasingly affected by HIV/AIDS (ABSA, 2001:14). Poverty related diseases such as HIV/AIDS and TB, as well as other diverse factors such as emigration, for example, have a significant impact on the working age population and represent a serious threat to the creation of a skilled and well-trained workforce.

Why the need for suitably educated and skilled learners?

A sufficient number of suitably educated and skilled learners who enter the labour market would benefit the nation and society as a whole, as well as the enterprises that employ them (Skills Development Planning Unit, 2002:2). At the national level, skills development contributes towards increasing the national income as production is increased. At the enterprise level, a skilled labour force contributes towards reducing production costs, thereby increasing profit levels. At the individual level, acquiring the necessary skills holds the following advantages (Skills Development Planning Unit, 2002:2):

- There is a strong association between a person's skills and qualifications on the one hand, and his or her earnings on the other. Without the necessary skills, learners entering the labour market will experience the world of work as a vicious circle in which they enter a low-skilled, low-paid job, get retrenched, enter another low-skilled job later, or simply remain unemployed.
- By acquiring skills, people understand their jobs better. Training improves self-confidence and this contributes towards boosting morale and productivity on the shop floor.
- The provision of good education to previously disadvantaged learners empowers them to find higher remunerated jobs. It should be kept in mind that in terms of population groups and skills attainment, the legacy of apartheid obviously favoured whites in general.

Reasons for the low employability levels of new entrants

The main theoretical and empirical reasons found for the low employability levels of learners

and new entrants to the South African labour market are discussed in the next sub-section. The strong overlap between the reasons found in theory and in practice should be noted.

Theoretical reasons

The theoretical reasons for low employability include the following:

The structural change in the economy

Along with the political, socio-economic and socio-cultural changes occurring in the country, South Africa's economy, in line with the global trend, has been undergoing a structural transformation into the new so-called 'service economy'. This implies that the main focus in the workplace has shifted away from activities based in the primary sectors of agriculture and mining towards the more knowledge-based secondary and tertiary sectors. The technological platform on which products and services are built is growing in complexity: work processes are reorganised and new knowledge is constantly introduced. Different skills and management competencies than those in the previous age of mass production are therefore required. These 'new' competencies include proficiency in mathematics, computing, reading, writing and reasoning; the ability to use resources and information constructively; interpersonal skills; the ability to understand systems and master technology; as well as flexibility to cope with change in the workplace (Pretorius, 2001:77). To complicate matters further, there is the unfortunate potential of reduced labour input. Where firms in industry view direct labour as a cost factor to be reduced or contained to ensure profitability, labour numbers are likely to be reduced (Jafta, 2003:13).

Now that the country is part of the global economy, South African businesses are forced to adapt to this structural change, as well as to foreign competition in the form of imports and foreign businesses operating in their home market. Quality and competitiveness have become the buzzwords in the domestic and international markets. These developments clearly require continuous evaluation as to whether the curricula and content of subjects offered in schools are indeed suitable and do equip learners to face the challenges in the workplace, especially as far as science, engineering and technology (SET) skills are concerned (Dlamini, 2001:24). Fortunately, an evaluation of curricula was done as part of the development of Curriculum 2005 and is discussed later in this article.

Structural unemployment

Closely linked to the structural change, a main reason given, why learners find it very difficult to secure a job after school at an established business or to create an own job, is the occurrence of structural unemployment. This is a concept found mainly in the economic literature and refers to a mismatch between worker qualifications and job requirements, or when jobs disappear because of structural and/or technological changes in the economy (Mohr & Fourie, 2004:564).

The effect of structural unemployment and technological developments in South Africa highlights the deficiencies in the country's education system: learners are educated and prepared to be successful in an industrial economy, whereas we currently live in an information and services era (Olivier, 2002:1). When scrutinising the content of school textbooks, it appears that in many instances learners are being educated to be successful in an economy that does not exist any more. This strengthens the argument that a vacuum has developed between the educa-

tion system and the job market. It also raises the question whether sufficient use is made of the input of experts with practical knowledge and experience in the private sector in decisions concerning the content of textbooks.

Educational reform is necessary to bring school and work closer together. In the United States of America, for example, learner employability is improved by initiatives that make greater use of the workplace as a learning site, such as the school-to-work strategy. According to this strategy, employers provide work-based learning opportunities to learners from schools in the surrounding area, whilst teachers integrate workplace experiences and career information with the classroom curriculum (Bailey, 19998:1). Industry involvement and participation also help to clarify the exact skills needed by industry (Bailey, Hughes & Barr, 1998:2).

Fortunately, based on the revised Curriculum 2005, teachers and subject advisors are currently able to evaluate and select learning material, including textbooks, in terms of various criteria, including the following (Department of Education (DoE), 2003b:17):

- Do the learning and teaching support materials address the needs of the learners?
- Do the learning and teaching support materials promote the principles of human rights, social justice, inclusivity and environmental awareness?
- Do the materials contain emphasis on learning outcomes, assessment standards and specific outcomes?
- Do the materials contain emphasis on the categories of outcomes: knowledge, skills, attitudes and values?
- Do the materials encourage the application of skills, attitudes, knowledge and values in real world situations?
- Are the materials appropriate for learners with a variety of language backgrounds and abilities within the medium of instruction?
- Are the materials going to be relevant for several years? (Will they have an extended shelf life, or will they need to be updated regularly?)

The successful adaptation of workers to the country's structural change was also slowed down by the legacy of apartheid, particularly the denial of access to quality education to the vast majority of the population for many years. Consequently, a significant portion of the population lack many of the basic competencies required to meet the challenges posed by the new structural economic change. As stated earlier, these 'new' competencies include proficiency in mathematics, computing, reading, writing and reasoning; the ability to use resources and information constructively; interpersonal skills; the ability to understand systems and master technology; as well as flexibility to cope with change in the workplace (Pretorius, 2001:77).

What happens in practice is that businesses do not employ new entrants unless they have mastered these 'new' job specific skills. Many businesses rather wait for other businesses to train school leavers in the necessary skills for a year or two, before they make them a better offer and employ them. The great shortage of computers and therefore computer literacy at schools, especially in rural areas, for example, is proof of the backlog that employers need to make up. Unfortunately for these and other school leavers in similar circumstances, employers are not always patient and willing to teach them how to use a computer, nor to spend time and money on teaching them the new job specific skills that are required.

Lack of entrepreneurial skills and orientation to create new business

Traditionally, individuals have followed a single career path. In the modern and changing

career world, however, no business guarantees a job for life, and people may have six to ten jobs in two or three different careers during their lives (Kroon & Meyer, 2001:48). This situation forces school leavers and other individuals to increasingly be enterprising and create their own job opportunities. An enterprising mind-set therefore needs to be inculcated that favours the formation of employers and not employees (Davies, 2001:36). Entrepreneurs, i.e. people who take risks, break new ground and play an innovative role in the economy, are therefore required to effectively address unemployment by revitalising the economy and creating jobs for themselves and others. The South African economy is clearly in need of self-driven people who have the willingness to engage in life-long learning, can develop themselves, are open to new opportunities, and who possess emotional intelligence. The last includes self-motivation and emotional level-headedness, as well as the flexibility to adapt to changes and complexities (Jordaan, 2004: 4). Such adaptable and skilled persons create job opportunities for themselves and others; they do not merely fill vacant posts (Olivier, 2002:1).

Unfortunately, the majority of South Africans are raised in homes where they have no, or very little, exposure to business innovation and entrepreneurship. Consequently, they "have little notion of themselves as resource creators or mobilisers, and economic risk taking is not strongly prevalent in most communities" (Davies, 2001:32). According to the 2003 edition of the South African Global Entrepreneurship Monitor report, South Africans are less likely than their counterparts in developing countries to be innovative, to see good business opportunities or to believe that they have the necessary skills to start a business. Most people in South Africa are brought up to believe that they must try and avoid risk by acquiring a job with financial and job security, a pension plan, medical aid and other benefits (Kroon & Meyer, 2001:48). Furthermore, the South African education system has in the past tended to lean towards a teacher/reproduction rather than learner/experimental learning culture, thus not preparing learners adequately to think critically or laterally, to be creative and explore opportunities that arise from environmental changes.

In the 2004 edition of the South African Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) report, Orford, Herrington and Wood (2004:26) state that the three most frequently identified factors that limit entrepreneurial activity in South Africa are a lack of entrepreneurial capacity due to weaknesses in the education system, inadequate access to financial support for entrepreneurs, and failure by the government in the delivery of support to entrepreneurs. The South African education system has for many years failed to develop entrepreneurial skills and attitudes among learners. Orford *et al.* (2004:4) stress the fact that effective entrepreneurship education should improve the human capital base for entrepreneurship and have a significant positive influence on particularly four areas crucial to entrepreneurship:

- learners' self-confidence about their ability to start a business;
- learners' understanding of financial and businesses issues;
- learners' desire to start their own business; and
- learners' desire to undertake higher education.

The education system therefore plays an important role in developing entrepreneurial skills and shaping attitudes towards entrepreneurship. Depending on the grade level and subject choices, effective schooling should develop awareness and skills in areas more specifically related to business, such as entrepreneurship, economics, and accounting. Fortunately, entrepreneurship has been introduced into the curriculum for Grades 3 to 9 since 2000 (DoE, 2002:14). For these grades, entrepreneurship forms part of the Economic and Management Sciences (EMS) curri-

culum. Entrepreneurship programmes are compulsory up to Grade 9 and one of the four learning outcomes specified for Economic and Management Sciences for Grades 7 to 9 is 'entrepreneurial knowledge and skills'. The other three outcomes include 'economic cycle', 'sustainable growth and development', and 'managerial, consumer and financial knowledge and skills'. From 2005, entrepreneurship has also been introduced into the curriculum for Grades 10, 11 and 12 as part of the subject Business Studies (which is an optional subject). Learning outcomes for Business Studies include the ability for learners to develop business plans and transform these into action plans, critically reflect on business ventures, apply creative thinking to address business problems, and discuss the principles of professionalism and ethics (DoE, 2003a:12).

Unfortunately, preliminary evidence suggests widespread problems across the country in establishing entrepreneurship programmes in schools, with many schools not offering any entrepreneurship education (Shay & Wood, 2004: 34). The primary reasons for this appear to be that schools do not have teachers able to teach entrepreneurship and that suitable supporting materials are not available in many schools.

Negative teachers with low morale and high stress levels

Hall, Altman, Nkomo, Peltzer and Zuma (2005:25) found in a recent research study that a relatively large number of teachers experience the teaching profession negatively, have low morale and experience little job satisfaction, with the result that they seriously consider leaving the profession The main causes of teacher dissatisfaction and low morale include remuneration, poor relations with the education department, a lack of respect for the profession shown by the community, as well as teachers being affected by the HIV virus or by being indirectly affected because of colleagues, learners and family members living with HIV/AIDS. In another education related study , researchers Chisholm, Hoadley and Wa Kivilu (2005:36) concluded that increased stress levels due to increased workloads cause the morale among teachers to be very low. Reasons given for the increased workloads include bigger class sizes, numerous departmental requirements, the Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS), the new curriculum and its continuous assessment requirements, as well as a larger number of learning areas for which there are no resources or teachers.

Many of these dissatisfied teachers remain in the profession because of limited alternative job opportunities and the fact that their current education jobs provide them with a regular income as well as other financial benefits such as a retirement fund, medical aid and housing subsidy. This situation is detrimental to both the learners and the teaching profession, as it is doubtful that such teachers will motivate and assist their learners to gain the necessary knowledge of job market requirements, and thereby improve their learners' chances of becoming employable. Negative teachers with low morale and high stress levels may do only the minimum required to complete the syllabus, rather than actively prepare their learners for a career.

Given the situation, it is interesting to note that the National Department of Education (2003b:2) is concerned that many teachers regard themselves as the only bearers of knowledge, and their learners as empty vessels just waiting to be filled, resulting in learning experiences that are uninspiring. Such uninspiring learning experiences, coupled with a growing concern among many senior learners that their education does not guarantee them a future job in the formal sector, can easily change the classroom into a very negative learning environment.

Empirical reasons

It was indicated earlier that a total of 455 questionnaires were completed by second and third year tertiary students at the NMMU who were registered for courses that required them to do practical work for specific periods in relevant jobs. The aim was to determine how they perceived their readiness for the labour market. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Tertiary students' perception of their readiness for the labour market

Question / statement	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Total (%)
My high school education prepared me sufficiently in language proficiency	12.6	87.4	100.0
My high school education prepared me sufficiently in computer literacy	37.0	63.0	100.0
I had sufficient exposure to career counselling at school	35.5	64.5	100.0
My high school education gave me certainty about what career to follow	38.8	61.2	100.0
The content of my studies at NMMU is sufficiently practical and prepares me well for my selected career	77.4	22.6	100.0
As a current university student I still have difficulty forming a picture of what my selected career will entail	27.3	72.7	100.0
As a current university student I am in doubt of my practical competence	32.2	67.8	100.0
As a current university student I am confident in the use of computers	82.6	17.4	100.0

Table 1 shows that the practical exposure received by students regarding the job market they intended entering gave them the necessary self-confidence that this was what they could do and wanted to do. Some 77.4% of the respondents indicated that the contents of their studies were sufficiently practical and prepared them well for their selected careers. A low 27.3% still had difficulty in forming a picture of what their selected careers would entail in practice, whilst only 32.2% were doubtful regarding their practical competence. The table also confirms that access to training equipment such as computers gave students the necessary confidence in using computers and contributed toward their readiness for the labour market. It is, however, concerning to note how negatively the respondents assessed their high school education as far as language proficiency, computer literacy and career counselling were concerned. Some 87.4% were of the opinion that their high school had not prepared them sufficiently in language proficiency, only 37.0% were satisfied with their computer training received at high school, and only 35.5 % were satisfied with the school counselling they had received at high school.

It was also indicated at the commencement of this article that personal interviews were held with selected recruitment staff members, at a wide spectrum of businesses representing industry in general, to identify the main problems (skill shortages) which they identified in new applicants and new entrants, either when interviewed as applicants for jobs, or when these new entrants had just started a new job. It should be noted that these responses covered applicants from a wide spectrum of schools, tertiary, and other training institutions. The following four

main problems (skill shortages) were identified in the survey:

- Difficulty to comprehend, in other words, difficulty experienced by candidates in forming a picture of what the job entailed and where they would fit in. This clearly pointed to a lack of foundational and reflective skills, as explained earlier. An ability to think independently, emotional intelligence, and flexibility to cope with changes in the workplace were skills that could and should be taught prior to entering the workplace.
- A lack of language proficiency: The respondents felt strongly that applicants found it difficult to communicate and express themselves clearly, whether orally or in writing. Proficiency in mathematics, computing, reading, writing, and reasoning, as well as interpersonal skills, as outlined earlier, were requirements for success in the job market.
- Practical incompetence: Applicants often did not have the ability to perform a set of tasks, i.e. they did not have the ability to use resources and information constructively. This underlined the gap that exists between what learners and students are taught in class and what industry requires in practice.
- Lack of self-confidence: Factors such as lack of practical training, not knowing what a specific career entails, and uncertainty regarding career possibilities and opportunities all contributed to a lack of self-confidence among new entrants to the job market. This problem was exacerbated by factors such as financial problems and studying in a second, or even third, language.

Strategies and responsibilities to increase employability

In response to the various theoretical and empirical reasons for the low employability rate of new entrants to the labour market, as outlined above, the following strategies are recommended to increase the overall employability of South African learners:

Learner employability and the Department of Education (DoE)

It is clear from the discussion thus far that the teaching process to prepare senior high school learners for the modern workplace must take cognizance of the fact that it is characterized by globalisation, international competition, structural changes, improved technology and an information revolution. Fortunately for all concerned, the Department of Education realises that the qualifications and programmes offered at schools have until recently not prepared learners adequately for success in employment and/or further education. Problems identified by the DoE (2003b:1) include a lack of clear educational outcomes for curricula; curricula that are unresponsive to the needs of learners and the country; assessment practices that cause learners to resort to rote learning which makes the application of theory to practice very difficult; as well as the fact that many employers do not regard matric results as reliable indicators of work-related competence.

To address these problems, the structure of the curricula and subjects offered to senior high school learners was reviewed "in the context of the imperatives of social and economic development and globalisation" (DoE, 2003b:2). The aim of the review and modernization process was to reconceptualise and rewrite the interim syllabi for Grades 10 to 12 into new, integrated and responsive learning programmes that would broaden access to a range of career options for learners. Based on the review, a new policy framework for learning and teaching for senior high school learners in Grades 10 to 12, referred to as the Further Education and Training (FET) band, was developed and published in a document, 'The National Curriculum

Statement Grades 10–12 (General)'. The FET band, as it applies to learners in Grades 10 to 12, is located between what is called General (Grades 7–9) and Higher (Tertiary) Education and Training and, very importantly, alongside the 'World of work'.

The new policy framework is based on the principles of outcomes-based education (OBE); social transformation; credibility; quality and efficiency; a high level of knowledge and skills; as well as integration and applied competence (DoE, 2003b:3). The OBE philosophy already forms the foundation for curricula in South Africa. It encourages a learner-centred and activity-based approach to education, and strives to enable all learners to reach their maximum learning potential by setting specific learning outcomes to be achieved by the end of the education process. A learning outcome is a statement of an intended result of learning and teaching and describes the knowledge, skills and values that learners should acquire. These learning outcomes are packed into subjects and, in the context of this article, it is most encouraging to note that each subject in the new curricula has very clear and definite purposes to be achieved. The purposes are all of a very practical nature. For example, each subject sets out to enable learners to:

- Apply and integrate .....
- Demonstrate and apply .....
- Collect, analyse and critically evaluate .....
- Communicate effectively .....
- Design, implement, test and deliver .....
- Write and present .....
- Access, interpret, construct and use .....

The practical nature of these outcomes will go a long way to contributing to the increased employability of learners. According to Kader Asmal, who was Minister of Education when the new policy was developed and the document published, it was envisaged that this policy "... will ensure that learners acquire and apply the necessary skills, knowledge and values in ways that are valuable and meaningful to their lives, and that the new curriculum will lay a solid foundation for life-long learning and different career paths ..." (DoE, 2003b:I). The question needs to be asked, though, whether teachers are well trained and possess the necessary skills to effectively teach learners the required skills, knowledge and values.

In terms of the new policy framework, a National Senior Certificate (NSC) has been developed for Grade 12 learners exiting in 2008 to replace the Senior Certificate which "is not an effective predictor for success in higher education or employment" (DoE, 2003b:2). The NSC is a band qualification registered at Level 4 of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and serves the purpose of:

- equipping learners, irrespective of their socio-economic background, race, gender, physical or intellectual ability, with the knowledge, skills and values necessary for self-fulfillment, as well as meaningful participation in society as citizens of a free country;
- providing access to higher/tertiary education;
- facilitating the transition of learners from education institutions to the workplace; and
- providing employers with an adequate profile of a learner's competencies.

To avoid confusion, it should be noted that the NSC qualification can be obtained in any one of the following pathways (DoE, 2003b:3):

- FET General. This is the FET qualification that will apply to senior high school learners. This FET pathway will be offered mainly by high schools, but also by some colleges where learners can complete their Grade 12 qualification. Learners will receive a general formative education based on a broad curriculum that is organised into subjects.

- FET General Vocational. This pathway is offered mainly by Further Education and Training colleges. It prepares learners for work and self-employment in small, medium and micro enterprises.

- FET Trade, Occupational and Professional. This pathway is offered by colleges and industry-based providers. Programmes will be demand-led and will include learnerships.

The responsibilities of teachers

As was indicated earlier, employers in the modern enterprise demand new entrants who are employable, or who at least command the required basic skills that can, with the minimum cost and effort to the employer, be adapted for productive employment. Schools therefore have a social responsibility towards their learners and should realize that learners are in fact their customers who require the necessary qualifications and skills to compete in the job market of the 21st century.

The National Curriculum Statement Grades 10–12 (General) "visualizes teachers who are qualified, competent, dedicated and caring" (DoE, 2003b.18). Teachers are expected to fulfill various roles, such as "being mediators of learning, interpreters and designers of learning programmes and materials, leaders, administrators and managers, scholars, researchers and life-long learners, community members, citizens and pastors, assessors, as well as subject specialists" (DoE, 2003b:18).

In addition to the above roles, it is recommended that teachers should pay special attention to the following aspects in order to contribute to the improved employability of their learners:

- Teachers need to ensure that they themselves have first hand up to date knowledge of the latest developments in their disciplines so that they are in a better position to inform their learners of the exact skills required by the job market. They therefore need to ensure that the content of what they teach is relevant and in line with what happens in practice. Knowledge of the job market will also put teachers in a better position to assist parents and learners when the latter undergo aptitude and interest tests in an effort to make the correct career choices. Sufficient funds should be made available to allow teachers to undergo continuous training to be equipped with the necessary knowledge and self-confidence to efficiently teach their FET subject. Training will also allow teachers to be up to date with the latest developments in the market place related to their specific disciplines.
- With the job-for-life concept no longer relevant, teachers need to prepare learners to expect and adapt to the realities of part-time employment, flexibility and life-long learning. Learners need to be made aware of the fact that they will, to an increasing extent, have to accept responsibility for creating their own jobs and their own career success. This involves life-long learning so as to continuously update their skills. An enterprising mind-set therefore needs to be inculcated which favours the formation of employers and not employees.

- With small business accounting for an increasing proportion of the economic activity in South Africa, it has become essential for teachers to assist learners in developing a greater measure of entrepreneurial and critical thinking. By creating an entrepreneurial environment in the classroom, teachers can instill in their learners a sense of the risks and rewards that await them in the business world.
- A positive attitude and enthusiasm for their subject among teachers will go a long way towards making the subject more attractive to learners and may even encourage them to follow a career in the same discipline.

Increased labour market input and private sector involvement

Curriculum 2005 aims at bringing school and workplace closer together. In terms of the school-to-work strategy referred to earlier, greater use should therefore be made of the workplace as a learning site. Regular visits to schools and workshops presented by people from industry, as well as visits by learners to institutions in the job market, will ensure closer co-operation between these two sectors and will help to clarify the exact skills needed by industry. Input from people in the job market in the writing of textbooks will also assist teachers to engage learners in active, practical and work-related learning.

It is further recommended in this regard that the possibility of introducing a system in schools, similar to the career-orientated Technikon Advisory Board system, be investigated by the Department of Education. According to this system, advisory boards consisting of members from industry meet on a regular basis with the lecturers who offer specific programmes, to evaluate the job-relevancy of these programmes.

Advice to learners

According to the DoE (2003b:17), learners emerging from the FET band must:

- have access to good quality life-long education and training;
- demonstrate an ability to think logically and analytically, as well as holistically and laterally; and
- be able to transfer skills from familiar to unfamiliar situations.

In addition, it is proposed that learners should take note of the following recommendations:

- Young people need to think anew about careers, e.g. by having a fresh look at those trades they seem to have avoided in recent years. They should focus their energies on acquiring the specific skills and knowledge demanded by occupations that are growing or show growth potential. This is why it is so important for schools to teach these skills and why the skills training needs to form part of a curriculum. There is currently a significant shortage of traditional trade practitioners such as electricians, fitters and turners, boiler-makers, and instrument-makers. Acquiring the correct skills can pave the way to an own undertaking, and this is also part of the process of life-long learning.
- The formal sector should not be seen as the *alpha* and *omega* for a successful career; neither should a university degree. Teachers and parents need to assist learners in focusing on careers that provide outsource and contract work such as logistics, planning, data management, as well as trades and services that support the formal sector. A main reason for this is that businesses in the formal sector, as part of their cost management strategies, increasingly focus on their core business and therefore outsource support services.
- Learners should not think primarily in terms of starting immediately in a management

position with a high salary and a big car when they consider a career. They should rather be willing to start at the bottom and then slowly build their careers. Like a cork, a good worker cannot be kept down.

- Learners need to realise the increased competition among themselves for job opportunities in the job market. Passing a school standard is no longer sufficient to secure a job. As stated earlier in this article, now, perhaps more than in the past, employers are looking for self-motivated achievers who have the characteristics that fit in with the new culture of life-long learning, self-development and emotional intelligence. Furthermore, the importance of proficiency in communication, reasoning, reading, writing, mathematics and computing skills cannot be overemphasised.

Conclusion

The challenge to improve the employability of senior high school learners in the modern job market, characterised by the information revolution, continuous technological innovation, globalisation and reorganized work processes, has indeed become a daunting one. The 'new' economy requires learners who command the 'new' skills, are self-driven, can work independently, can set themselves challenging personal goals and adjust quickly to changing circumstances. These 'new' skills include proficiency in mathematics, computing, reading, writing and reasoning; the ability to use resources and information constructively; interpersonal skills; the ability to understand systems and to master technology; as well as the flexibility to cope with change in the workplace Although there are also other solutions to the problems of employability and unemployment — such as higher economic growth, international economic developments and parental upbringing — this article has focused mainly on educational solutions.

To address the challenge successfully requires a combined effort: a much closer co-operation between the public (DoE) and private sectors and teachers is needed. Learners need to be exposed to relevant outcomes-based entrepreneurship programmes, whilst teachers must be encouraged to drive a new mode of thinking. Learners must be made aware that they need to carefully select their subjects for the job market, or for enrolling at a tertiary institution. To successfully play their identified roles and implement the new FET structures successfully, teachers constantly have to make their learners aware of the specific skills that are required by the modern job market. Input from experienced private sector employers, when curricula are developed and textbooks written, has also become an absolute necessity.

Failure by any of the role players to act on the specific educational strategies and responsibilities outlined will aggravate the serious problems of low employability and unemployment with their related socio-economic problems of poverty, crime, and violence.

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