

ASSAf COMMENTARY ON THE DHET GREEN PAPER FOR POST-SCHOOL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

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FOREWORD

The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) invited responses to the Green Paper for Post-School Education and Training. The development of the Green Paper following wide consultation is welcomed. In order to provide a formal commentary on the Green Paper, ASSAf set up a panel consisting of selected Members of the Academy, who have played a critical role in the higher education and training sector and in the National Science and Innovation (NSI) system.

Members of the panel were:

Prof Theuns Erasmus – Former Vice-Rector, University of Pretoria.

Prof Wieland Gevers – Professor Emeritus of Medical Biochemistry, University of Cape Town.

Prof Chris Swanepoel – Former Vice-Principal: Academic and Research, UNISA.

Prof Francis Wilson – Professor Emeritus in Economics, University of Cape Town.

Prof David Woods – Former Vice Chancellor, Rhodes University (Chair).

1. INTRODUCTION

The Academy welcomes the opportunity to comment on the DHET Green Paper for Post-School Education and Training. The development of a quality and expanded Post-School Education and Training system is essential for economic development, reducing unemployment and the provision of a skilled workforce. Although there are many issues in the Green Paper which we welcome, there are areas of concern which are addressed in the commentary.

We support the DHET's vision of a single, coherent, differentiated and highly articulated post-school education and training system in overcoming the structural challenges facing our society. This can be done by expanding access to education and training opportunities and increasing equity, as well as achieving high levels of excellence and innovation at all levels of performance in the workforce and society. The Green Paper rightly focuses primarily on the non-university (further) education and training sector (FET system), with the emphasis on the training of high quality technicians, technologists and artisans, as well as professional support (e.g. health) and service (e.g. police and correctional system) personnel. While the university system is in somewhat better shape than the FET system, it is also confronted by significant problem areas that require solutions in concert with the reforms and improvements required in the schools and the non-university post-school domains.

The ASSAf Panel recognises the great care that has been taken in the Green Paper in analysing the precise nature of the issues in each sub-sector of the post-school system, in reaching some initial conclusions on remediation, and in presenting options for the best way forward in each case. Some preliminary policy development has already been achieved, and much thought has already gone into the different areas of needed change. While it is clear that much further analysis and a wider debate will be required, this must not be allowed to blunt the momentum that the Department has quite obviously succeeded in generating. Our commentary is thus directed largely at the identification of particular unresolved or under-explored issues, and the expression of some ideas as to how these might productively be addressed.

2. FETC AND SKILLS SECTOR

2.1 Size, shape and quality of the FETC system

There is a huge and increasing need for an increase in the scale, scope and quality of non-university education and training in South Africa, not only to enable the growth and expansion of the economy, but to capacitate individual citizens and communities to gain some control over their lives. To kick-start this, the Green Paper rightly proposes the expansion and strengthening of the 'Further Education and Training Colleges (FETCs). In 2011 the enrolment at FETCs was 359 000 and it is proposed to increase this to 4 million by 2030. There are only 50 mostly multi-campus FETCs at present, and the quality varies from good to adequate to dysfunctional; now it is envisaged that there will be one (good) FETC per district by 2030, differentiated in focus and serving the needs of surrounding communities. We support this agenda whole-heartedly and believe that it is essential that we move as rapidly as possible towards the goals outlined above. At the same time we are mindful of the enormous difficulties involved in rapid expansion, not least in ensuring good quality teaching, administration, facilities and infrastructure. We urge government to pay particular attention to these issues.

2.2 Specific options under consideration (4.3: Other public colleges; it is long-overdue)

The Panel is of the opinion that the rather skimpy treatment of (school) teacher-training, the nursing, police and other public 'sectoral' colleges in the Green Paper is a weakness, as these are high-volume institutions capable of expanded functions in order to build the larger FETC system. We appreciate the 'weak' authority of the DHET over these entities, but the evolving system of 'joined government' can surely permit joint planning and implementation in this area (i.e. through signed collaboration agreements). Of the two options presented on page 30, we strongly favour transfer of the responsibility for some or all of the public colleges currently administered by provinces or by government departments other than the DHET, to the latter department, in order to maximise the use of existing resources (financial, physical and human), and to encourage the evolution of a seamless post-school system.

Throughout the Green Paper there is an emphasis on increasing numbers but the issue of quality is critical. Quality will require attention to physical and ICT infrastructure, as well as human resources.

The Green Paper does not mention the need for a sound work ethic as a profound and an encompassing requisite for teachers, lecturers, researchers, managers, students and learners across the post-school education and training system. The policy frameworks for the new post-school system require the implementation of an effective and accountable 'values' system that provides the essential basis for promotion and rewards.

2.3 Absolute requirement for an improved school system

The DHET cannot achieve the laudable objectives outlined in this excellent Green Paper unless the effectiveness and efficiency of the public basic schooling system is dramatically improved. Learners exiting secondary schools at various levels must be able to benefit from the proposed varieties of FETC training; at present the school system is not capable of meeting this requirement to the required extent. If the serious and pervasive problems still confronting the school system are not solved soon, the enlightened proposals of the Green Paper have little chance of being successful. The (central) DHET must work closely with the DBE (preferably through a signed 'Collaboration Agreement') to ensure that the policies and practices of the (central) DBE and of the nine Provincial (basic) education departments are closely aligned with the needs of the evolving, much-expanded post-school system. Metaphorically, the left hand must know what the right hand is doing.

The Panel notes, for example, that the 'Technical Schools' have been, or are being closed, and recommends that careful consideration be given to their resuscitation, in order to provide appropriately designed technical education for learners with technical interests from Grade 7 onwards (see next section). The quality of this education must ensure that the students can either qualify at Grade 12 or seek entry to a FETC for further skills training.

2.4 Specific options under consideration (4.2.2: Role of FET Colleges – Programmes and Qualifications)

The issue is the future approach to the National Certificate (Vocational), the NCV. The ASSAf Panel believes that the third option of having separate types of NCV programmes for persons who have completed Grade 9 and Grade 12 learners is the best solution. It believes, however, that the most efficient and cost-effective way is for the first group to be accommodated in the proposed revamped 'technical school' system, and the second in the FET Colleges. It is not good enough for the Green Paper to state that the technical high schools are "beyond the scope of the DHET"; every department must be able to negotiate a

joint solution of a big national problem with a sister department. After all, Umalusi has responsibility for matters that affect both the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and the DHET.

2.5 Availability of good-quality lecturers and teachers for the FETC system

The Panel notes the careful thought that has been given to the primary question of the supply-chain of educators and lecturers for the expanded FETC system, and supports the initial moves that have apparently already been made in discussing the matter with higher education institutions and elsewhere. The successful expansion of the FETC system will require a massive increase in the supply of well-trained lecturers (particularly in the fields of technology), teachers and managers, with major implications for the teaching/training programmes offered at all HEIs but particularly the Universities of Technology and Comprehensive institutions. These are struggling at present to produce enough academics to staff their own institutions, and would need to make major changes in the way they operate to produce the FETC lecturers and teachers required; in fact, the training of FETC lecturers and teachers would become a major focus of the HEIs. Whether the salaries of FETC lecturers and teachers would attract the huge number of trained people required would also be a worry, as they are likely to be capable of employment in many areas of the economy and society in general.

At a time when the prevailing model of (basic) schoolteacher training is problematic in terms of both organisational and volume of production, it is necessary to reflect on how the issue of a massive increase in FETC lecturers/instructors will be systematically addressed. If this is not done the aims of the Green Paper will not be achieved.

2.6 Distance education and infrastructure

It is likely that new digital modes of teaching (including distance learning) through national broadcasts, internet-based programmed instruction and other methods will have to be thought through and deployed in order to complement the work of teachers on the ground. This will have to be counterbalanced by hands-on equipment and training facilities.

Infrastructure will be a question of location (to facilitate access in diverse regions) and actual buildings, equipment and ICT connectivity. Lessons must be learnt from the good existing FETCs, from exemplars in other countries, and from concerted planning within government

in conversation with both the private sector and the state-owned enterprises (SOEs). Demand issues must speak as loudly as supply. The capital investments will accordingly be heavy, but this can be mitigated by imaginative use and sharing of facilities with organisations with similar functions and requirements, as well as contributions by industry, both private and state-owned.

2.7 New centres and institutions

To increase and enhance the education and training of post-school students the Green Paper proposes the introduction of a new institutional type; provisionally called Community Education and Training Centres (CETs). These should be multi-purpose so that all space and facilities are used throughout each day, week and month of the year. We support this plan.

A new Institute for Vocational and Continuing Education and Training will be established which will develop curricula for the CETs and do research for this sector. This is a good idea, but we advise that the Institute be designed carefully in order not to become yet another 'resource-draining layer' of the system.

2.8 SETAs

The SETAs have an important role to play in the expanded education and training of a future workforce. The Green Paper notes that the performance of the SETAs is variable and that they need to be reviewed and attention given to their governance structures. They should focus more broadly on overall skills training in their sectors, including the training of the large numbers of teachers and lecturers that will be required in their sub-systems, and a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to skills planning. They should work closely with, and use the training facilities of, the FETCs, HEIs and industry. The substantial funds of the Levy Grant System need to be utilised more efficiently and effectively, and are an important resource which has not been optimally utilised.

The Green Paper has a very short section on workplace-based learning and training (Chapter 5, page 36) which in our view does not 'scale' the topic to its proper dimension as a vital component of most post-school training programmes, and as a major current problem in the more advanced sector of UoT and comprehensive higher education-connected professionalization stages. Linking the much expanded FETC sector to workplace training periods will massively compound these problems. The panel is aware that Germany has a

well developed and excellent “Apprenticeship Technical Training” system and recommends that the DHET investigates the German system to gain insight on how to implement a successful system in South Africa. There are other countries (e.g. South Korea, Finland and Netherlands) with well developed “Apprenticeship Technical Training” Systems that also may be worth investigating.

3. UNIVERSITY SECTOR

3.1 Differentiation, size, shape and quality

The Green Paper recommends a high quality differentiated university system for more students. The universities must be differentiated as regards research in terms of focus and nature, but all must provide high-quality teaching producing quality graduates. The numbers are planned to increase from the present 899 120 (16% participation) to 1.5 million (23% participation) by 2030. As with the FETC sector, few indications are given as to how this is to be achieved. It is more of a wish list than a reality given that all universities are full, staff student ratios are mostly unsatisfactory with staff overloaded with teaching and difficulties in training and attracting new academic staff. Staff numbers and funding have not kept pace with increasing costs and enrolments. Unless the staffing, resources, facilities and infrastructure requirements are addressed the aims of the Green Paper will not be achieved.

The proposed differentiation of the university system is welcomed. The funding formula should drive the behaviour of the differentiated universities and should prevent mission drift. Each university must, however, have autonomy (within centrally administered policy) as to who it admits, what is taught, and what is researched. The Panel welcomes the increased investment in research and a more stable funding model.

Again there are conflicts between quality and quantity such as the quality of qualifications versus the quantity of throughput and pass rates; high –level, internationally recognised research versus production of large numbers of PhD graduates.

The panel welcomes the increase in distance education, but more attention must be paid to the Digital Revolution and new methods of teaching and learning at all post-school education and training institutions. If the post-school education and training sector is ‘smart’ and adopts these new developments, it could achieve a balance between quality and quantity. There is to be a major reform of funding, bursary and loan schemes for students. It is envisaged that

there will be virtually free education for the poor via NSFAS. The Panel welcomes the regulations regarding the conversion of loan to bursary for students who meet graduation requirements.

3.2 Persisting developmental and management problems

The Paper mentions the persisting developmental and management problems at the historically black universities but there is no clear plan to address these problems. Continuing to see their failure as a legacy of apartheid is not going to be helpful, if the past 17 years leaves them with “severe financial, human, infrastructure and other resource constraints”. A well-thought out plan to solve the problem is required.

There needs to be a realistic plan to deal with the problems of managing and ensuring proper functioning of multi-campus universities and FETCs. This is not mentioned in the Green Paper.

3.3 African languages

The panel welcomes the fact that the position of African languages is addressed directly in the Green Paper and the appointment of a panel who will advise the Minister on African languages at universities. African languages at university level do not deserve to remain under the cloud of uncertainty they are at present. They have been sites of seminal research by local and international scholars in the fields of linguistics, literature and folklore since the early nineteenth century. They have the capacity to be developed as additional languages of instruction as well as to facilitate communication. The work in the universities needs to dovetail with a co-ordinated and coherent language policy in the schools.

4. NQF AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

The Panel welcomes the plans to simplify the NQF and the associated Quality Assurance Systems. There is a need for a clear and focussed QA system at the different levels and in different sub-sectors. Strengthening external assessment systems for national qualifications is a priority.

4.1 Specific options under consideration (9.3.3: Simplifying the national framework)

The panel recognises the difficulty in making a choice between Options one and two presented on page 74, but on balance would favour the retention of the level descriptor-based model for ordering qualifications into a ‘qualification framework’ (Option one), if only because the suggested Option two proposal of ‘mapping’ qualification types against each other is not feasible without an agreed method for so doing. How would the ‘hierarchy of qualifications’ be generated without having endless argument about its basis in the broad system? We agree there is no basis whatsoever for unit standards in higher education.

The recently published CHE paper on the ‘Higher Education Qualifications Framework’ (HEQF) is a sensible and realistic treatment of this long-drawn out subject. It must, however, still be properly located in the ‘real world’ of the HE institutions, and become a policy tool that steers the system towards producing the kinds of competent graduates needed in the economy and society. We remain concerned that purposeful curriculum design is still under-developed in the ‘general’ faculties and programmes.

The tension in the NQF system (other than higher education) between ‘unit standards’ (parts of qualifications) and whole qualifications must be managed carefully in the light of the newly proposed multiplicity of career tracks in the post-school domain. Flexibility must be maximised but quality ensured.

4.2 Specific options under consideration (9.4.1.2: The scope of quality councils)

When it comes to the optimal configuration of quality councils, the panel strongly favours Option two, retaining the three present councils and their jurisdictions, but making provision for joint jurisdiction over specified areas through written collaboration agreements. We are totally opposed to Option three, as the well-established and –embedded professional and ‘advanced vocational’ programmes in higher education must continue to be part of the CHE/HEQC system of quality assurance, in partnership with the statutory bodies concerned.

5. DHET

The panel believes that the establishment of the DHET has been a good development. Given the number of tasks that the Green Paper indicates that the DHET will undertake,

however, there is a major concern that the DHET lacks the capacity to do what is required. This will impact on delivery of a quality post- school education and training system. Linked to this is the lack of a comprehensive, accurate integrated data system which will take time to develop.

The DHET seems through this Green Paper to 'invite' its own re-naming, to a Department of (say) 'Post-basic' (or 'Post-school') Education and Training (e.g. DPBET), much better to describe and identify its major role in the country's future. We would support such a name change but would not like the appellation "Higher Education" to disappear altogether. This could be accommodated by the Department being organized in two broad divisions, viz. Higher Education and Post-Basic Education and Training.