

No reason to delay R9.5 billion spend on skills development*

Ideal target is 12 500 artisans annually

South Africa's Further Education and Training (FET) system is better placed than ever to put state funds to good use and accelerate the delivery of critical middle-level skills – especially artisans – into the economy.

John Botha, executive director for strategy at Production Management Institute (PMI), says that with the overhaul of the FET college sector and of Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) over the past year, areas where interventions are most required have been identified.

'There is therefore no reason why the R9.5 billion allocated to FET colleges and skills development by Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan in his medium-term budget last week cannot be immediately allocated and spent.'

'The FET college sector is geared to providing the theoretical qualification component of artisan training, as well as other occupational training, requirements, and the framework for the creation of a single, cross-sectoral artisan training system is now in place.'

'The gaps and the needs across the system are clear,' says Botha.

Botha attributes this improved status quo in the FET landscape to two key DHET developments:

- Firstly, the shift of FET college management from regional to national government, coupled with interventions to ensure that FET colleges offer full qualifications that are integrated with both the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and general and higher education, and which are aligned to both industry and the SETAs
- Secondly, the incorporation of SETAs into the DHET followed by a restructure of the SETA landscape and radical improvements to SETA constitutions and governance structures.

Says Botha: 'SETA boards are far more capacitated than before - they are stronger, have independent chairpersons, and better business, government, and labour representation.'

In establishing a standardized national artisan training infrastructure, the DHET will do away with sector-specific programmes and with SETA-issued certificates of competence.

Meanwhile, Botha says that the interventions required at FET colleges are all set for investment and mobilization. 'The sooner they are implemented, the sooner we will see improvements in programme quality, more enrolments of youths and adults, and better qualified teaching staff.'

Botha applauds the introduction of the Artisan Development Technical Task Team (ADTTT), the National Artisan Moderating Body (NAMB,) and the Ministerial Task Team charged with improving SETA performance. He says these three agencies will be central in creating a standardized and sustainable apprenticeship-based artisan development programme.

'Government's target of 50 000 artisans by 2014/15 may still be somewhat ambitious, but we have certainly come a long way in setting the scene for a serious injection of artisans and other critical middle-level skills into the workplace.'

Meanwhile, business, government, and labour have committed to training 30 000 new artisans following the recent signing of the National Skills Accord (NSA). Of this total, 13% is to come from state-owned companies, 31% from government, and the majority – 56% – from business.

As part of the NSA, private companies have committed to increasing their training spend to well over the compulsory 1%-of-payroll training levy, a significant proportion of which will be steered towards the FET colleges.

Says Botha: 'Of course, there is much work to be done by all stakeholders, but it will be interesting to assess the impact that these measures have on boosting South Africa's current output of 5 600 qualified artisans annually to the target of 12 500.'

Botha emphasises the importance of the artisan-technician-engineer ratios set by industry, which he says are crucial for planning around higher-levels skills. It is currently anticipated that for every eight artisans that qualify, three will become technicians and one will become an engineer.

'This overall progress around middle-level skills development feeds directly into the New Growth Path (NGP) and its manufacturing enabler, the Industrial Policy Action Plan 2 (IPAP2), as well as the National Skills Development Strategy III (NSDS III) and the Human Resource Development Strategy of South Africa (HRDSA).'

Production Management Institute (PMI), an accredited private training company in the Adcorp Holdings stable, currently trains about 5% of the national artisan output.

Botha says that in 2011, PMI expects to produce in the region of 1 500 qualified artisans. ◆

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