



SOUTH AFRICAN

Journal of Science

January / February 2012

New green paper on higher education lacks a clear vision

The new green paper on higher education correctly places emphasis on vocational training, but offers little in the way of a coherent plan to implement the necessary changes in the system.

Perhaps the most serious problem facing the development of South Africa is its 3 million 18–24 year olds who are neither in any kind of tertiary education, nor in the labour market. Of these 3 million, 0.5 million have only primary education, 0.5 million have Grade 8 or 9, 1 million have Grade 10 and 0.6 million have a National Senior Certificate (NSC) but no university degree exemption (for which all that is required is a NSC with 4 of 7 subjects from a designated list at 50% or better). So Minister of Higher Education and Training Blade Nzimande's suggestion that enrolments in the college system will need to expand at least tenfold in the next 20 years is in principle a good one. By 2030, he wants to see university headcount enrolments of 1.5 million (a projected participation rate of 23%), plus 4 million enrolments (a participation rate of approximately 60%) in colleges or other post-school institutions, such as the community education and training centres he proposes to establish. This would represent an almost complete reversal of the current situation, where university enrolment is three times college enrolment.

The green paper (<http://www.info.gov.za/view/DownloadFileAction?id=157903>) correctly recognises the danger that post-school education may be seen as a way of postponing the problem of high unemployment rates. Thus Nzimande's vision for the public Further Education and Training (FET) colleges as 'primary sites for vocational skills development for artisans and other occupations at a similar level in areas such as engineering, construction, tourism and hospitality, business administration, and early childhood educare' is a fine ideal. He intends colleges to offer both general vocational qualifications (the National Certificate Vocational or NCV) and more focused occupational programmes. The latter should include theory components for both trade and non-trade programmes (including apprenticeships), as well as practical training components (where applicable).

The paper also acknowledges a crucial problem with the current system. The NCV was introduced to offer learners who had completed Grade 9 an alternative (vocationally orientated) pathway to finishing school. However, the NCV currently attracts a large proportion of school leavers who have completed Grade 12 – more than 50% of students enrolled in FET colleges. Thus the NCV seems currently to fulfill a dual role – as a parallel qualification to the NSC, and as a post-secondary qualification. Lecturers at these colleges are in the unenviable position of teaching two very different cohorts of students together: those who have completed Grade 12 and those who left school as early as Grade 9. It is perhaps unsurprising that recruiting staff to these colleges is not easy. Moreover, if the college population is to rise to 4 million, how many of these would be post-Grade 12 and how many would be from those who had left school between Grades 10 and 12? The answer determines the real post-school participation rate.

The obvious solution – puzzlingly not identified in the paper – is the reintroduction of a school-leaving qualification at the end of Grade 9. Analogous to the old Junior Certificate, such a qualification would be an exit point from the school system, with an examination that candidates must pass in order to qualify for college education. As the current system does not have exit qualifications at the end of each grade, attending classes in a specific grade offers no guarantee that a learner has achieved a specified level of competence.

At the university level, the paper offers little in the way of specific means of achieving the more modest expansion which is projected, apart from the establishment of universities in the two provinces that currently lack them – Mpumalanga and the Northern Cape. No one can argue that 'the university sector should comprise a continuum of institutions, ranging from specialised, research-intensive universities to largely undergraduate institutions' and that 'whatever else they do, all universities in South Africa must offer a high-quality undergraduate education'. But it appears to be easier to identify problems in educational systems, in particular, than to come up with workable solutions. Nzimande has been slow in offering solutions in terms of differentiation, which he identified early on during his term as needing attention; he also has done little to address management capacity in several of the country's universities where it is clearly lacking. The serious throughput problem in South Africa's public universities is also skirted in the paper.

This month's tragic events at the University of Johannesburg testify to the desperate enthusiasm of those currently excluded from the tertiary sector to enter it. But Nzimande is going to have to make some tough decisions if his laudable vision is to be implemented, and learners' legitimate aspirations for appropriate tertiary education are to be met.