Generation J

In late April 2013, The Economist carried a leader and a substantial article on ‘Generation jobless’1. The International Labour Organization estimates that at least 75 million young people (15–24 year olds) worldwide are job seekers, while the World Bank believes that 262 million young people are economically inactive in emerging market countries – with the total figure for the world being closer to 300 million. At the global level, ongoing economic woes are probably the greatest single cause of joblessness, although additional, specific factors apply in particular countries. So while the obvious starting point in creating youth employment is to restart economic growth and ensure that well-organised and supportive labour markets are operating effectively, countries need to consider their own circumstances with care.

South Africa’s Centre for Higher Education Transformation (CHET) revealed in a 2009 publication2 that, in 2007, there were 2.7 million young people in the local 18–24-year-old cohort who were not in employment, education or training (NEET). By 2011 this figure had grown to 3.2 million3 or about 40% of the cohort and more than three times the number of young people in South African public and private universities (about 950 000 students). Addressing the dire circumstances of NEETs in South Africa requires far more rapid and consistent economic growth. But with year-on-year GDP in decline since the fourth quarter of 2010, and with opposition to the National Development Plan – a plan that might bring the downward trend – this route is not, right now, an option.

Sad, job creation programmes for the young and unemployed have largely been resisted and, where they have come into being, have not touched the growing numbers of unemployed youth.

Other ways of addressing this potentially risky socio-economic situation are clearly needed. And amongst these, education is foremost – but the programmes directed towards the needs of NEETs that include a strong focus on science and technology, both theoretical and applied. Partly in response to the CHET findings, the Department of Higher Education and Training prepared and launched its Green Paper on Post-School Education and Training, aimed at addressing the problem, in January 2012, with a 3-month period for comment and response that ended on 30 April 2013.

During those 3 months, vast volumes of commentary were generated by, amongst others, the Council on Higher Education, Higher Education South Africa and most of the public universities. Many of the responses started with phrases such as the Council on Higher Education’s comment: ‘The release of the Green Paper on Post-School Education and Training signals a key shift in the evolution and development of the post-apartheid transformation of the education and training system’. From there on, however, most of the commentary was critical of a document that lacked coherence and failed to address the real needs of young people, the education system and the economy. Twelve months on, however, most of the commentary was critical of a document that lacked coherence and failed to address the real needs of young people, the education system and the economy.

So many years wasted; so many opportunities wasted. Time for the Ministry to focus more earnestly on the well-being of young people and the economy.

References