

The human right to a relevant education

 By Jackie Carroll

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Human Rights Day, celebrated on 21 March, serves as a reminder of past injustices and our achievements in working towards an equal society. The right to education is the key to the improvement of people's lives, no matter what life stage they are in. An education provides skills for employment, opportunities for innovation and alleviates poverty at both the individual and societal level.



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A relevant education is essential for the progress of developing countries such as South Africa. As per an article on Dawn.com, in the education industry, the word relevance relates to "learning experiences that are either directly applicable to the personal aspirations, interests or cultural experiences of students (personal relevance) or that are connected in some way to real-world issues, problems and contexts (life relevance)."

Adult learning

The recent recession has convinced many adults that pursuing further education to improve their skills and credentials may not only be wise, but may be a necessity in a shrinking job market. In a complex modern economy, workers must be up to date on new techniques and technologies related to their job, in order to keep their jobs.

Adults in particular need to see links between the content they are learning and their lives. Malcolm Knowles, the "father of adult learning", stresses the importance of helping adult learners make those connections. He suggested that adults need to know why they need to learn something before they begin the learning process. Adults manage their own lives and have many responsibilities, so they are capable of directing or, at least assisting, in the planning and implementation of their own learning.

Currently, matriculants are entering the work force virtually illiterate without the skills to successfully pursue either tertiary education or an artisan career. Catastrophically, the majority of those who have completed matric are being placed on adult education and training (AET) levels that are below Grade 9 with low levels of literacy, which means there is significant work to be done. AET is the only way to bridge the gap between what should have been achieved at school and what needs to be learned to function as an employee, in order to contribute to the economy and society at large. Until we are able to improve the relevance of our education in South Africa, we will have to continue to import the skills that we need - at a premium price. This price comes at a premium cost to our economy; our personal development and the right to a decent life for all our people.

So how do we ensure that the current AET programmes are relevant?

Education, at all levels, needs to be upgraded to respond to the needs of society, especially to help learners attain practical skills that can lead to gaining and maintaining employment. Training programmes must provide real life skills, encourage

innovation and support learner talents. Technology must be incorporated into learning methodologies to accommodate work schedules. Adult learners are not always able to spend extended periods of time studying, SOE-learning platforms allow adults to access the course material at a time that suits them.

While current plans and certain programmes are encouraging, government and the private sector should continue to work on meeting the need for increased access to quality education for all through public-private partnerships. These could include centres at educational institutions that offer training courses, technical advice and scholarships or grants to foster start-up businesses.

UNESCO believes that "education is a powerful tool by which economically and socially marginalised adults and children can lift themselves out of poverty and participate fully as citizens". I could not agree more. It is only through education that the country will see a significant amount of social change and a decrease of poverty. A literate workforce is an empowered and more valuable society with fires in their hearts, food on their tables and their right to a relevant education fulfilled.

ABOUT JACKIE CARROLL

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