

Western Cape business, government, academics discuss education

In a show of solidarity between business, government and academics, business think tank and catalyst Accelerate Cape Town succeeded in bringing business leaders and leaders in education in the Western Cape together to discuss education challenges that impact the local economy.

Insights into the education system were provided by Donald Grant, Minister of Education for the Western Cape, who spoke about the school system and education as a foundation for economic growth, and Max Price, the vice-chancellor of UCT, who provided some detail on the Green Paper on post school education.

MEC Donald Grant said his department was working on a number of strategies to improve the quality of education and access to education in the Western Cape, as education was an important foundation for GDP growth. "Through quality education we can ensure that the citizens of our province are able to get jobs, earn a good income and live lives of value. Performance levels in schools are a key indicator of quality of life for our people."

A long way to go

Grant said the Western Cape had a maturing education system, but still had a long way to go in bringing in targeted, systemic improvements to the system. Interventions included upping the investment in teacher training from R8m when his term started to R94m today, speeding up the filling of vacant teaching posts, and improving numeracy and literacy levels and especially the ratios of maths and literacy so that the province could produce more engineers. The department was also working on improving performance assessment of teachers and principals.

Two interventions that particularly interested business leaders were the involvement of corporates in the upliftment of schools and the improvement of technology in schools to improve the quality of education they could offer. The Western Cape Education Department welcomed the idea of corporates lending their management expertise to struggling schools, or focussing their corporate social investment (CSI) initiatives on schools that needed assistance. Grant said the impact of CSI initiatives, however, needed to be better tracked and monitored to understand their real impact.

Getting connected

Grant said the Western Cape Education Department was planning to provide all school principals in the province with tablets so that they could stay connected, and was working to improve internet connectivity for schools in general. The provincial government was also investing over R90m in bringing a broadband network to Khayelitsha.

Vice-chancellor Price spoke about the Green Paper on Post School Education, which deals with universities, FET colleges, skills training programmes and other education programmes. "Higher education is an important partner in regional development. Vibrant and strong higher education institutions are critical for advancing democracy, development and critical citizenship," said Price.

"The production of graduates with high level skills, research and innovation is key to economic growth for the knowledge economy. Stronger higher education institutions help to make regions attractive destinations for potential investors, businesses, students, academics and conferences."

Concern about FET programmes

He expressed concern, however, about the fact that both the province and the country do not have enough FET colleges, or an adequate throughput rate, compared to other emerging economies. The balance between enrollment in universities and FET colleges is also incorrectly skewed towards universities, he maintained, with insufficient school leavers enrolling in FETs. This could be attributed to concerns about the relevance of FET programmes, insufficient levels of innovation and research by FET colleges, lack of coordination or proper systems to inform planning in the sector, and high levels of unemployment of FET graduates.

Price said business had a role to play in establishing additional, in-house training institutes to ready school leavers and graduates for the working environment. "The public sector can't grow fast enough. It can't do it all on its own," Price said. Grant also encouraged business to support the school system through CSI initiatives as government could not achieve the desired levels of quality education in the country without additional support.

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