

SA still not producing employable graduates

Apart from producing more science and maths graduates, SA needs to make another giant leap if it is to better respond to the growing demands from business for graduates that can "walk into" jobs.

Business has long complained about the cost of training graduates to fill positions, and is becoming increasingly unwilling to hire new graduates. This comes as companies demand employees that can add value from day one, says John Botha, executive director for strategy at Adcorp's training company, the Production Management Institute.

The trend of those with bachelor degrees being unable to find employment is a worldwide phenomenon, with students increasingly beginning to question the cost versus the benefit of a university education.

This is mirrored in SA, where "the general lack of relevance of higher education qualifications is unmistakable if one looks at the large numbers of vacancies in higher-skilled jobs across private and public companies on the one hand, and, high numbers of unemployed graduates on the other," says Botha.

Qualified to do little

This sentiment was echoed by higher education and training deputy minister Prof Hlengiwe Mkhize last week, when she said instead of South African universities producing graduates that could "hit the workplace running", it seems the exact opposite was happening.

This dilemma is occupying the minds of government officials as the state seeks to expand educational opportunities and upgrade skills to respond to the needs of 3-million youth aged 17-24 who are not in education, employment or training.

The failure of the education system to produce employable graduates was a primary motivation behind Jacob Zuma's decision to split the Department of Education into the Departments of Basic Education and Higher Education and Training in 2009.

The constitution has already been amended in order to transfer the responsibility for further education and training (FET) colleges from provinces to the higher education department, a move whose primary objective is aligning college curricula with national standards and the demands of industry.

Universities have 'changed little' over past two decades

While FET colleges are a primary focus for the government's skills development plans, higher education minister Blade Nzimande is also working to ensure that universities increasingly respond to SA's "actual development needs" rather than sit

"in their ivory towers".

Alongside the demand that universities address a shocking dropout rate of about 50%, Nzimande has made it clear he wants increasing integration of curricula between all higher education institutions in a bid to increase student mobility and therefore their educational options.

Botha says while there are clear frameworks for skills development, the lingering question is about execution. There is inherent resistance from academic institutions to dilute academic integrity, and universities have changed "very little" in the past 20 years, he says.

Symptoms of the tension between traditional academia and the skills demands from business are to be seen in the expansion of business schools. Many universities have found the need to "bolt on a very business- focused educational arm to the usual traditional academic focus, which just speaks volumes," he says.

Source: *Business Day* via I-Net Bridge

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