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The alignment and responsiveness of further education an training colleges towards the skills needed by local businesses

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ABSTRACT

This report examines the responsiveness of Further Education and Training (FET) Colleges towards the skills needed by local businesses. According to the then Department of Education (1998) the performance of FET Colleges worldwide is judged by the responsiveness and alignment of the learning and training offered at the colleges in relations to the skills needed by local businesses and industries, and the extent to which learners are offered meaningful access to lifelong learning opportunities. However, in the South African context this seem not to be happening as reports from the business sector, skills development experts and researchers in the skills development field indicate that FET Colleges in the country appear not to be responsive to the skills needed by local businesses. This has continued despite the recapitalisation intervention by the government which involved a R1.9 Billion injection between 2005 and 2007 aimed at enhancing the functioning of all public FET Colleges in the country.

In pursuing the study, a research project was carried out in the Nelspruit Central Business District (CBD) and Kanyamazane community of the Mbombela Municipality in the Mpumalanga Province, focusing on intermediate engineering and related skills, such as, artisan skills acquired through FET College National Certificate: Vocational (NCV) programmes. The NCV programmes were introduced in 2007 by the then Department of Education working together with the Department of Labour with the intention of integrating theoretical learning and practical training within FET Colleges in order to enable FET Colleges to produce graduates that were not only practical and technical skills oriented but were also knowledgeable in their chosen fields and were academically oriented as well.

The sample of the study involved FET College staff members, FET College learners, local businesses and a Mpumalanga Provincial Department of Public Works officer, using qualitatively data collection techniques such as interviewing, observation and content analysis.

The findings of the study revealed that FET Colleges were perceived by businesses not to be responsive to the skills needs of local businesses. The views expressed by the businesses in the study were that FET College learners appeared to possess good theoretical knowledge of their chosen fields but demonstrated poor quality in the execution of practical and technical tasks such as the use of basic tools and other equipments, leading to most college graduates requiring intensive practical training after graduation before they can be competent to work independently. Nevertheless, the study demonstrated that FET Colleges faced various challenges that influenced negatively the practical training segment of learners, one of which being fewer opportunities for learners to access workplace-based training placements within businesses to acquire practical and technical skills. The lack of workplace-based training opportunities for learners emerged as the major contributor to the disjuncture between the good display of theoretical knowledge and the poor practical skills possessed and demonstrated by college learners.

Finally, the study presents some recommendations highlighting the need for FET colleges to transform the structure and delivery of the NCV programmes to enhance the synergy of the theory-practice combination, and the need for collaboration between FET colleges and local businesses guided by information sharing, material, financial and training support between the two sectors.