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Over-engineered and under-supported

Why building institutions matters more than designing systems

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About the project

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SA-TIED is a unique collaboration between local and international research institutes and the government of South Africa. Its primary goal is to improve the interface between research and policy by producing cutting-edge research for inclusive growth and economic transformation in the southern African region. It is hoped that the SA-TIED programme will lead to greater institutional and individual capacities, improve database management and data analysis, and provide research outputs that assist in the formulation of evidence-based economic policy.

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Abstract: This paper examines two key sets of institutions in South Africa's post-apartheid skills development architecture: the sector education and training authorities and the technical and vocational education and training colleges. Drawing primarily on a synthesis of international and South African research, supplemented by focus groups with industry associations and workplace interviews, this paper argues that both sets of institutions have been undermined by an over-engineered regulatory and governance framework derived from New Public Management and the 'global toolkit' of vocational education reform. Rather than building institutional capacity, successive policy interventions have layered bureaucratic compliance mechanisms onto fragile institutions, alienating employers, distorting skills planning data, and undermining quality. What is required instead is an institution-building approach, one in which the state actively supports, guides, and coordinates rather than merely regulates and evaluates.

Keywords: sector education and training authorities, technical and vocational education and training colleges, skills development, employer engagement, skills levy, audit culture

1 Introduction: strengthening skills development and support to transition young people from school to work

This paper analyses two key sets of institutions created to support skills development in South Africa: Sector education and training authorities (SETAs) and technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges.

SETAs are part of the ‘skills levy’ institutions, created through a levy-grant system during the transition to democracy (Akoojee et al., 2005; Allais, 2013a; Kraak, 2004a, 2008; Ngcwangu, 2014). Two main aims are at the core of the system: to improve insight into employers’ skills needs and to improve the amount and quality of available training to meet these needs. The idea was that the former would be achieved by gathering information from employers on skills needs, and the latter by incentivizing employers to provide training, as well as by pooling funding to provide training that supports employers’ and workers’ skills needs individually and collectively (Akoojee et al., 2005; Allais, 2013a; Kraak, 2004a, 2008).

The 50 TVET colleges, with many campuses across the country, are envisaged as key institutions in the South African post-school education and training system (Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), 2013b). They offer work-related programmes at the senior secondary level, as well as post-school qualifications that are below degree level.

Both sets of institutions have faced challenges and been subject to policy changes.

The skills-levy institutions were designed to involve industry in education and improve relationships between supply and demand. However, in many cases, the industry feels the skills systems are not meeting its needs. As highlighted by a recent flurry of articles in the press, widespread corruption and poor resource use are a persistent problem in SETAs (as they are in much of the state).

In terms of colleges, the government’s goals over the past 30 years have focused on producing young people with the skills that employers need and increasing TVET enrolments. The latter goal has been repeated multiple times, as have programmes to capacitate colleges. And yet, while we have pockets of excellent provision and some excellent colleges, the systemic goals have not been achieved. Arguably, the two policy goals are contradictory. While the economy clearly requires skilled workers, in its present state, it does not need a mass TVET system. In fact, the massification of the system makes high-quality skills provision very difficult to achieve.

This paper argues that the institutional model for SETAs has, with some exceptions, not supported industry engagement. SETAs were created as new intermediary institutions, with insufficient thought about how they should be structured in different sectors of the economy, or how to build their capacity to play their envisaged roles. When many of these fledgling institutions struggled to fulfil these roles, the state responded with managerialism, including performance indicators and reporting requirements. Both the institutional design and the tools that SETAs are expected to use for obtaining skills needs from employers have alienated employers rather than built engagement. The design and tools have both led to a flourishing consultancy industry supporting SETAs and a bureaucratic compliance monitoring system from the DHET that exacerbates problems instead of solving them. This leads to further alienation of employers and makes it less likely that SETAs will build meaningful coordination and sectoral dialogue.

Colleges have, in different ways, suffered under the same type of managerialist regime that has not focused on institution-building nor built responsive institutional capacity.

This paper starts with a review of international literature, which shows that our problems are not unique. The task of building insights into skills needs and training is inherently difficult. Building strong technical and vocational education provision is just as difficult in countries without occupational labour markets for mid-skilled jobs, where employers do not coordinate on skills and training, and where vocational education is highly stigmatized. International research on skill formation provides insights regarding why our institutions have, in many instances, performed poorly to date, as well as some principles for strengthening and streamlining them.

Drawing on the analysis of international literature and an extensive analysis of existing research on problems experienced by SETAs and TVET colleges, this paper argues that the skills levy is necessary to support underfunded and poorly developed measures for the provision of vocational and technical education and training. Industry-wide coordination is also necessary, including with bodies like SETAs. The operational problems and challenges of the system thus far do not negate the necessity of the system, but changes are needed. SETAs have been constrained by a rigid institutional design, inappropriate and ungainly governance models, and overdesigned and clumsy rules and tools for skills planning and training support. What is required is not an abolition of the SETA system, but some pragmatic simplifications of the rules and tools, and the diversification of the institutional models for SETAs and TVET colleges. Further, neither set of institutions will become vibrant, dynamic, and responsive by virtue of representative governance structures. These institutions need to be actively built and supported by the state and industry.

2 Methodology and overview

This paper is a synthesis of existing research, analysis, and reviews of SETAs and TVET colleges, as well as other relevant grey literature, which is located in a review of international literature on skill formation. Two focus groups were conducted with industry associations, and research on skill formation in manufacturing companies was consulted for perspectives from the shop floor, as well as interviews that were conducted with 22 industry associations. This paper does not provide an overview of figures and data; some of this can be obtained through DHET Stats at a Glance, an annual publication available on the DHET website. A systematic cost-benefit analysis of the system was beyond the scope of this research and is problematic in various ways, as discussed further below.

This paper starts with a brief synthesis of international research, followed by an analysis of existing knowledge about SETAs and TVET colleges. It concludes with suggested directions for improving the current systems.

3 Insights from a review of international research

The irony of vocational education is that while many actors believe it is an immediate tool for enabling people to access work, it is also widely regarded as failing, and considered the weakest link in education and training systems, even where general and higher education provision are also considered weak (Allais, 2023b; Allais and Marock, 2023; Martinez-Fernandez and Weyman, 2014; Mastercard Foundation, 2020; Palmer et al., 2007). Building insight into employers' skills needs is often seen as the holy grail of reforming vocational education provision (ILO, 2015, 2017). The first section of the literature review addresses why this is complex.

3.1 Skills anticipation, skills mismatches, and labour markets

The International Labour Organization (ILO) describes skills needs anticipation as 'activities to assess future skills needs in the labour market in a strategic way, using consistent and systematic methods' (ILO, 2015, p. 3). Many different approaches exist; all have limitations. In particular, it is considered crucial to ask employers what their skills needs are, but these responses are complicated to translate into educational planning. Employers often speak about soft skills, even when they require technical skills, and usually focus on immediate or short-term skills needs, while education systems can only cater for medium- to long-term skills needs (Allais et al., 2021; Allais and Ngcwangu, 2025; Gamble, 2016a, 2016b).

Avoiding skills mismatches is also complex because the ways in which education and training (i.e., credentials) are valued in labour markets are different from how expertise and skills are valued and used in workplaces, and the two may be at odds (Allais, 2017; Bills, 2003). Labour market rewards are contingent on certain factors that change over time, for example, the content of work and frequently the number of people who complete particular levels of education (Carnoy, 2019). This means that an individual's chance of getting a particular job or class of jobs depends not only on their skills and qualifications, but also on the skills and qualifications of the other applicants and the number of qualified applicants. For example, in the South African context, making matric the entry requirement for jobs may relate to job requirements for literacy, but it may simply be a screening mechanism. The massification of secondary schooling and, in many countries, higher education, over the course of the 20th and early 21st centuries, makes opting out of these parts of education provision difficult (Carnoy, 2019; Trow, 2000; Wheelahan, 2016). This analysis led Brown (2006) to introduce the idea of an opportunity trap, as opposed to an opportunity gap, to characterize the phenomenon of social congestion in the competition for jobs.

Positional competition for credentials in labour markets makes building vocational education systems more difficult (Allais, 2022b, 2023a). The limited availability of high-paying formal-sector jobs puts pressure on students to attend general education because degrees are so important for accessing the limited number of well-paying, long-term jobs. In countries with small numbers of well-paying, long-term jobs, and particularly those where vocational education was stigmatized due to colonial educational experiences (Curtain, 2004; Lauglo and Maclean, 2005;

Matasci et al., 2020), preference for general education is pronounced, thereby reinforcing the structural weaknesses of vocational education provision.

There is no one labour market, but rather a number of organized labour markets, with very different dynamics and implications for skills provision. Occupational labour markets, which are organized through regulated or well-understood occupations, tend to be associated with strong training programmes (Freidson, 2001). Bureaucratic labour markets or internal labour markets tend to be associated with strong on-the-job training models, but only when employment is stable. Free labour markets, or labour markets with minimal regulation, work against training, as training is not in the interest of either individuals or employers. International labour markets also contribute to skills mismatches and make it difficult for many low and middle-income countries to train for the needs of their own economies.

It is often assumed that once the skills needs of the economy have been understood and listed, ensuring that the education and training system provides the needed skills is a simple matter. In other words, the assumption is that skills anticipation is the difficult part, and that skills provision is relatively straightforward. As a result, much policy focus in South Africa has been on systems to obtain employer perspectives on skills needs, and government systems to regulate provision for these needs. This underestimates the difficulty of offering technical and vocational education and the ways it needs to be built and supported. Skills are not exogenous variables in economic systems: the ways in which skills are developed and used in workplaces are embedded in social and economic arrangements and institutions, with many moving parts that shape each other. I therefore turn to a brief consideration of insights from the institutional political economy of skill formation systems.

3.2 Political economy of skill formation

The nature of the skills offered through education systems and firm-based training is shaped by the organization of occupations and by socio-economic conditions in the labour process on the one hand, and by the organization of education and training systems on the other (Hall and Soskice, 2001; Iverson and Stephens, 2008). In wealthy countries, formal vocational education and training provision systems have taken markedly different forms because each developed within distinct economic systems and was shaped by particular configurations of industrial relations and welfare policy (Bosch, 2017; Busemeyer and Trampusch, 2012b; Hall and Soskice, 2001; Martin, 2017; Oliver et al., 2019; Thelen, 2004). Relatively few countries have built education and training systems in which substantial numbers of upper-secondary students follow vocational education and training pathways leading to meaningful employment. The most successful and well-known are the German-speaking countries of Europe, as well as some other northern European countries. In these countries, the key to building strong vocational education was collective cooperation among employers, as well as between employers and the state, and sometimes unions, over long periods of time.

Some degree of success in building the technical and vocational education provision required by economies is seen in the Asian developmental states. In these countries, particularly South Korea, strong state coordination in a rapidly industrializing economy through state-led industrialization was able to build effective skills provision, at least for a time. National, industry-funded, and industry-led institutions were created in some Latin American countries, with the main example being Brazil. The institutions achieved successes during the importindustrialization period in providing training to a population for whom academic secondary education was not easily accessible (de Moura Castro, 1979). The closest South Africa has come to this type of model is the old Industry Training Boards.

Outside of these examples, most countries have struggled, and continue to struggle, to build vocational education provision systems, even when their economies clearly require skilled workers. Wealthy industrialized countries with relatively fluid labour markets tend to see strong provision of general education, and early massification of university education, perhaps because workers in fluid labour markets have stronger incentives to remain generalists and because credential inflation favours academic education (Collins, 1971, 1979). Collective action problems mean employer-sponsored training tends to be firm-specific, non-transferable, and uncertified (Busemeyer and Trampusch, 2012a; Winch, 2025), although relatively cheap because of strong general education.

Most low- and middle-income countries have weak vocational education systems, often coupled with relatively weak school systems, or pockets of strong provision, but weak provision overall.

The distinction between skills needed for work and credentials needed in labour markets, as well as the complexity of skill formation systems, helps to explain why understanding the value-for-money proposition of skills provision is complex. This will be discussed next.

3.3 Measuring effectiveness

Making judgements about what works in education-to-work transitions at any moment is a moving target, with many confounding factors, and there is no simple way of measuring the value-for-money proposition. Recent reports, such as Botha and Haverman (2025), have methodological problems, and any serious cost-benefit analysis would need a far more nuanced and accurate dataset. For example, the question can be raised whether programmes should be evaluated based on how many learners completed the programme, how many accessed short-term employment, how many accessed long-term employment, whether jobs were saved, or whether companies were able to expand. Ideally, we would want to examine the relationships between skills and productivity, but we do not have clear ways of measuring these. For example, productivity is usually calculated using salaries, which ends up circular, or calculated using output, which has limited applicability outside the manufacturing sector.

It is difficult to generalize findings related to the success of specific training interventions beyond the context in which the intervention succeeded and to the extent that it did. A meta-review of active labour market policies in Africa confirms that in the vast majority of cases, interventions are evaluated based on what is straightforward to quantify—the cost of a programme, how many learners enrolled, how many people accessed employment in the short term—without further analysis to determine if this was new employment or simply displacing someone else out of the labour market (Allais and Marock, 2025, in press).

Hence, the difficulties experienced by SETAs and TVET colleges cannot be understood by merely reviewing training programme outcomes. Similarly, the contribution or failures of the system cannot be understood simply by costing the programmes funded, or even the employment trajectories of funded individuals. This does not mean that our skills levy systems should not be evaluated. We need to build up systematic research and insight in this important area, and short-term evaluations can be part of this picture. A meta-review of all SETA and National Skills Fund (NSF) programme evaluations and tracer studies would contribute to our insights into the system. Analysis of the system would be greatly facilitated by improved dataset alignment, a clear priority identified by researchers in this area (Rogan and Isdale, 2022). Further, given that the skills levy system was established to meet the skills needs of industry, industry engagement and satisfaction should be at least one key indicator of the healthy functioning of the system.

3.4 Employer engagement

Policymakers in most countries have found it difficult to engage employers and are attempting to build institutions to achieve this. However, the task is clearly complex.

As discussed above, in a handful of countries where employers, and sometimes unions, have a strong history of coordination, strong mass vocational education systems have developed.

The term ‘beneficial constraints’ is used to capture the phenomenon of arrangements that pressure employers to invest in training that imposes short-run costs but strengthens their competitive position over time (Streeck, 2012). In many other countries, a key conundrum for policymakers is that employers do not always conduct the apparently necessary training, and do not coordinate with each other. There are many arguments for why this is the case. In relation to the former, the classic analysis is poaching, starting from Becker (1976), and in relation to the latter, the analysis is company engagement with each other in liberal market economies (Hall and Soskice, 2001).

Despite these difficulties, employer involvement is widely seen as indispensable to effective training systems. Policy has therefore focused on drawing employers into system governance through compulsion, incentives, and dedicated funding mechanisms, giving rise to skills levies and sector skills bodies in many countries (Gonçalves, 2019; Gonzalez-Martinez and Gardiner, 2019; Mehotra and Singh, 2019; Palmer, 2020).

I start with a consideration of sector skills bodies, followed by skills levies.

The need for sector skills bodies and implications for the difficulty of building them

The policies and systems that South Africa has adopted have been widely attempted internationally. Indeed, many international agencies describe our systems, which we are so very critical of, as best practice (ILO, 2015; ILO Skills and Employability Branch, 2021; UNESCO, 2012). Sector skills bodies are promoted and currently being developed in many low- and middle-income countries to facilitate employer engagement and leadership (ILO Skills and Employability Branch, 2021). The rationale for sector skills bodies is that dialogue between employer associations, unions, and the state can make education and training more responsive to workplace needs. They were first developed in the United Kingdom (UK) (Keep, 2005, 2007, 2012; Payne, 2008) and subsequently adopted in Australia and Canada (Hughes and Hughes, 2010). In some cases, excluding the UK, sector skills bodies and training levies (which are discussed further below) go together (Payne, 2008).

Employer engagement through sector skills councils is considered an important part of skills anticipation systems. In some countries, sector skills councils are involved in the development of occupational standards.

Sector skills bodies in Africa are being developed in Ethiopia, the Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique, South Africa, and Tanzania (ILO Skills and Employability Branch, 2021). There is little published research available, including commissioned evaluations and peer-reviewed research. Documents and reports on government websites, and available through international organisations, describe the sector skills bodies as currently in the design phase or being built, even though some have 'been in development' for more than a decade.

Sector skills bodies typically do not arise organically from employer communities but are created by states or development agencies (Bravo et al., 2022; Kraak, 2013). Some are described as employer-involved models because the government retains control, such as in the UK and Australia (Kraak, 2013). By contrast, Raddon and Sung (2017) describe the bodies in Hong Kong as employer-owned ones, although other researchers contest this (Hung, 1998).

Setting up structures has not been sufficient to enable or ensure employer engagement. Much more attention needs to be paid to finding the right level at which to involve employers (Powell, 2016). Clearly, simply building institutions with representative boards and structures is far from sufficient. Employer engagement is complex and requires deliberate, systematic, and ongoing attention, starting with the issue that employers are not coordinating on skills and training, with some exceptions (e.g., the dairy industry in South Africa). It follows that sectoral structures will need different strategies in different industries, depending, for example, on how active and organized industry associations are, how many industry associations there are, how unionized sectors are, and how much collective bargaining there is. This should be considered an active task, and not something achieved by virtue of the creation of a sector skills body.

SETAs and other structures focused on employer engagement must start by considering the specific purpose of different engagements and structures to involve the right level of employers and spend time and energy encouraging participation from strategically placed people in companies and unions. Where there are existing active industry associations, they can play an important role. Where there are numerous industry associations, SETAs can facilitate agreements amongst them. SETAs also need to acknowledge that the more their systems and processes focus on bureaucratic processes and compliance, the less likely they are to succeed in obtaining cooperation from strategic players in industry.

Skills levies combined with incentives for training are an intervention related to, but not always part of, sector skills bodies.

Training levies

Employer payroll levies earmarked for training are now operational in close to 100 countries (Palmer, 2020), reflecting the difficulty many low- and middle-income countries face when mobilizing public budgets for vocational education and training. India requires larger firms to allocate a portion of profits to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities, including vocational training (Sharma and King, 2019). Latin American countries have followed Brazil's model of employer-funded national training institutions (de Moura Castro, 2000; Gonzalez-Martinez and Gardiner, 2019). Levy-funded bodies have proliferated across Africa (Johanson, 2009; Ngatia and Rigolini, 2019; Palmer, 2020; Walther and Uhder, 2014).

The logic is that firms contribute a proportion of their wage bill to a ring-fenced fund and recover costs by conducting training (Mehotra and Singh, 2019). Such hybrid mechanisms offer a stable funding stream while incentivizing employer participation (Hughes and Hughes, 2010). Beyond individual employer benefits, the broader ambition of levy systems is to support sector-wide training, at least partly replicating the collective skill formation characteristic of coordinated market economies.

A review of levy systems across the Southern African Development Community (SADC) found persistent problems, including weak design, poor governance, inadequate monitoring, and the widespread perception that the levy is simply an additional tax (Palmer, 2020; Walther and Uhder, 2014). Bennell (2023) notes that governments have, in some cases, redirected levy funds away from vocational education and training, a pattern recently replicated in South Africa (Sachs et al., 2023).

In short, most countries have experienced significant practical and political challenges in setting up these structures and operating them as intended.

3.5 The 'global toolkit'

The last section in this review of international literature explores the dominant models for reform, what some researchers have labelled the 'global toolkit', which South Africa's systems exemplify (Allais, 2014; McGrath, 2012).

This approach to reforming vocational education first emerged in the UK in the 1980s (Allais, 2025; Wheelahan and Moodie, 2025), using market-like mechanisms derived from new public management to govern and fund provision (Crouch, 2011; Hood, 1995). New public management brought economic rationality to public sector governance, prioritizing measurable outputs over procedural controls (Hood, 1995; Pollit, 1998; Wolf, 2010). Its logic shifts the state from direct delivery to regulation, holding providers accountable for results rather than processes. Incentives are set up to target both existing service providers and providers who could enter new markets.

New public management, as an approach to public sector reform, originated in anglophone liberal market economies and spread to many developing countries. Its core mechanism was dividing state functions into contractualized units that compete for public resources (Hood, 1995; Phillips, 1998; Pollit, 1998). The state focuses on regulating contracts and assessing the adequacy of its contractors against performance statements (Palley 2005). The assumption is that by creating a market for such services, the state will force providers to maximize customer satisfaction and minimize cost. Hence, efficiency and productivity will increase, and innovation will be encouraged.

Irrespective of whether this can work for some services, this market logic vastly underestimates what quality vocational education and training requires, and how they can be measured and evaluated. For example, curriculum development is time-intensive and requires a high level of professional capacity that is often missing and needs to be developed. Industry engagement demands dedicated capacity, and lecturer professional development is ongoing. Institutions funded solely on enrolment numbers have no capacity for planning, curriculum renewal, or community engagement (Allais, 2014, 2022a, 2025).

With the wider set of new public management assumptions comes a set of specific assumptions about the skills system, all based on the idea that skills are both the problem and the solution. The core assumption is about the power of skills development to drive economic success. If low skills are tackled, economic success will be achieved with social benefits following in its wake. Employers are assumed to know what skills are needed; their identification of these needs, it is assumed, can facilitate the delivery of necessary occupational standards and qualifications. Further, it is assumed that governance structures will be sites of rational debate and planning, where power and vested interests no longer exist. Indeed, the new structures will overturn historical conditions of low trust within skills systems.

The reform package originated in the UK in the 1980s, where policymakers argued that colleges were insufficiently responsive to employer needs (Dale et al., 1990; Moore and Ozga, 1991; Wolf, 2002; Young, 2007). The Adam Smith Institute's 1984 report framed vocational providers as self-serving producers requiring competitive discipline (Wheelahan and Moodie, 2025). The basic logic was that vocational colleges and vocational education teachers could not be trusted to deliver the curriculum that industry wanted. However, it was believed that they would be forced to become relevant if they were subject to market discipline and in competition with private-for-profit providers.

One of the tools that was used by the state was the specification of competency standards or learning outcomes. The belief was firstly, that these could be based on workplace analyses, thus making them relevant, and secondly, that having them specified in qualifications would clarify what educational institutions were selling (Wheelahan and Moodie, 2026, in press). Educational institutions re-envisaged as responsive providers competing in a market would use these to design their curricula. While the idea of employers specifying competence requirements has superficial appeal, a large body of research shows that it only works for broad occupational competencies or company-based training where it is not really needed (Allais, 2016; Wheelahan, 2010; Winch, 2013).

Sector skills councils first emerged as part of this reform, with the hope that they would capture the industry voice, despite emerging from the state and not the industry, as discussed above.

Qualifications frameworks also play an important role. A key concern of new public management thinking is market failure due to informational asymmetries. It is believed that simplifying qualifications systems, underpinned by rigorous quality assurance, will send accurate and digestible information to market actors. Here, assumptions rest on further beliefs regarding rational choice based on the rigorous and dispassionate use of available information, and, even more problematically, the idea that education programmes can be reduced to easy-to-digest outcomes.

In summary, the global toolkit positions the role of the state as regulating, quality assuring, and funding vocational education based on learner enrolments in targeted programmes. The assumption is that public providers will become more efficient through governance reforms, regulation, and ranking, as well as a more targeted use of financial incentives (Allais, 2023c, 2025; McGrath and Lugg, 2012; Wheelahan and Moodie, 2025). It is also assumed that educational institutions and their staff have the capacity to shift from previous methods of curricular design, delivery, and assessment to novel methods, as well as the capacity to pivot rapidly as new skills needs emerge.

These reforms did not achieve their goals in the UK (Keep, 2007, 2012), nor in Australia, where they were next adopted (Wheelahan and Moodie, 2025). The results were the massive weakening of vocational education in Australia, as the private sector started offering versions at reduced prices, so that funding was diverted away from the public providers and left the public colleges with no ability to cross-subsidize expensive, but important, courses (Wheelahan and Moodie, 2025). In poor countries, the result is simply very little provision—because providers do not just emerge by virtue of funds being made available (Allais, 2007).

And yet, versions of this global toolkit quickly started to move to the global South. South Africa was both an early adopter (the qualifications framework was gazetted in 1995, the first year of the democratic era) and a key vector for the further dissemination of the approach to the rest of the continent and later to other regions (Allais, 2014). This package of reforms is now prevalent in many low- and middle-income countries as policymakers and development agencies look to vocational education to contribute to economic development and ameliorate youth unemployment (Allais, 2023c; McGrath et al., 2019).

Although logic underpins the use of markets and market-like mechanisms, the approach assumes very high levels of state capacity. The state becomes the regulator and overseer of analysing what programmes are required, how these are provided, and their quality. The assumption is that a state which does not have the core capacity to deliver, does have the capacity to identify, collect, and analyse information; evaluate provision and assessment outcomes; and make informed decisions. A whole range of new organizations must be created and staffed. These staff members may or may not have experience in either industry or education, but will be able to mediate the two, as well as make meaningful judgements about skills requirements and provisioning quality.

Understanding the conceptual logic of the global toolkit of vocational education reforms explains why the SETAs have their hands tied, and the colleges have been weakened and subject to institutional incoherence. Creating institutions to coordinate employers was never going to be simple, nor was building vocational education institutions. However, the overriding logic guiding how our systems have been developed made them much less likely to succeed, as the government has attempted to develop multiple layers of incentives and criteria for steering and governing the system. The funding model has led to a system with high transaction costs, little strategic steering, and high levels of corruption.

This state of affairs is not unique to skills; we have seen problems with the logic of new public management across the public sector. The approach was adopted to deal with the rigid bureaucracy of the apartheid state, but it has led to overregulation and the deprofessionalization of the state, with attempts at managing delivery by auditing departments against targets. This has not only failed to deal with corruption, but arguably has increased corruption, as increased contractualization creates increased opportunities for resource capture and decreased professional capacity in the state.[1] Simultaneously, performance reporting and auditing cultures have inadvertently contributed to a narrow interpretation of legislation and programme goals (Meny-Gibert, 2025). Extensive regulation is not a substitute for more active sanctioning of

[1] See **https://pari.org.za/submission-white-paper-on-local-government-review-process/**.

unlawful behaviour through the legal system. Technical and operational professionals are disempowered, ironically often giving more scope for action to corrupt actors (Klaaren et al., 2022, 2023). What is required is improved monitoring and performance evaluation, coupled with legal enforcement to challenge corrupt practices and incompetence. In addition, we need law enforcement to work, i.e., an institution or set of institutions empowered to act when red flagging systems raise issues in an institution. We currently have institutions to counter organized crime, or organizations requiring a presidential proclamation. Many issues related to corruption can be attributed to weak selection and appointment processes for senior civil servants and board appointments due to inadequate checks and balances. In short, what is required is more effective governance systems and appointments, more effective financial management, more effective auditing, serious consequences when there are breaches, and for the disciplinary process to work properly.[2]

Having obtained insights from the international research, I now turn to examining South African institutions specifically.

4 Analysis of the SETAs and colleges

Policy changes regarding the colleges, as well as the creation of the skills levy institutions, were driven by the need to solve serious problems. Lack of access to education and formal qualifications had been used to justify the apartheid colour bar in workplaces. In the late days of apartheid, the apprenticeship system, designed to benefit young White Afrikaner men, was collapsing. Many businesses operated on a low-wage, low-skill model, and researchers and unionists argued that there was insufficient modern business practice in terms of training workers and giving them more responsibility in flatter teams (Kraak, 2004b; McGrath, 1996).

The discussion below starts with SETAs, followed by additional factors that add complexity to our systems, and concludes with an overview of institutional models of colleges.

4.1 SETAs

The skills levy system was designed to create an incentive for employers to share information about their training needs, to train, and to support training that meets the broad needs of industry and the economy. Initially, SETAs had an additional role of ‘quality assuring’ provision in their sector; this was removed, although some still play some role in this fraught area.

SETAs have changed in various ways since the early 2000s. They have been the subject of considerable evaluation, contestation, and debate, as well as a Ministerial Review (DHET, 2013a; Mzabalazo Advisory Services and REAL Centre, 2018; Marock et al., 2008). They have changed over time in terms of remit, configuration, and sectoral demarcation, and have been reduced from an original 33 to 21 (DHET, 2012). The Skills Development Amendment Act 31 of 2003 introduced significant changes to the original Skills Development Act 97 of 1998, the key

[2] This analysis draws on various pieces of work by the Public Affairs Research Institute (PARI), as well as personal communication with Dr Sarah Meny-Gibert, and a draft of a forthcoming PARI paper by Dr Gibert called ‘The Promises and Pitfalls of Audit Culture’.

objective of which was to strengthen the Minister of Labour's powers to influence the work of the SETAs and to hold them more accountable.

None of the changes took sufficient cognizance of the key structural problems at the heart of the difficulties the SETAs have had in achieving their core mandate. These include systems for skills planning, disbursing funds, and governance.

Skills planning

Regarding the skills planning systems, the workplace skills plan process was set up to obtain information from employers about skills needs. There is a wide variety of reasons why data collection goes wrong. Some of the problems are easily fixable, and others are more complex.

Firstly, many employers do not participate, and insights from non-levy-paying members are not obtained. This is particularly true for smaller companies and workplaces. The proposals below are aimed at solving this and other problems.

As documented in earlier research, employer data in sector skills plans is systematically distorted by the design of the workplace skills plan and annual training report systems (Allais, 2022a; Allais and Ngcwangu, 2025). In many cases, those employers who do submit a workplace skills plan and an annual training report do not provide information on all their skills needs. Rather, they provide information on the skills needs that they believe SETAs are most likely to fund, as well as the training that they have conducted. This is at least partly because the annual training report requires them to report on training according to the workplace skills plan. Therefore, employers primarily indicate the skills needs that they can address within the year or have already addressed in their training plans (DHET, 2013a). This was confirmed in interviews with industry associations. This has the perverse incentive of encouraging employers to withhold information about their training needs.

Submission of these two reports is the basis for employers obtaining the mandatory grant, which is currently 20% of the levy that they paid to SARS. Therefore, the mandatory grant now has a dual role: it is supposed to incentivize employers to submit information about their skills needs, but it was originally intended to incentivize employers to do training. The mandatory grant allocation was reduced from an original 50% of the levy down to 20% and has been the subject of legal action ever since. In the 2026 Presidential State of the Nation address, an indication was made that it will be changed to 40%.[3]

Employers are providing incomplete, partial, or inaccurate information because of how the system is designed. Therefore, insight from employers is difficult to obtain. We have a national mechanism for obtaining this information, yet we have designed this mechanism in ways that mean we obtain weak data.

A more complex problem is that employers report not finding the Organizing Framework for Occupations (OFO) a useful tool, as it reflects neither skills nor jobs in terms of how employers think about them (REAL Centre, 2025a). In the many cases outside of regulated occupations

[3] See **https://www.thepresidency.gov.za/state-nation-address-president-cyril-ramaphosa-1**.

with clear license to practice requirements, employers do not hire according to occupations, but according to their own job descriptions and required skill sets.

The flawed data obtained from employers goes into sector skills plans. SETAs also obtain data from additional sources, such as labour force data from Statistics South Africa (Stats SA). Some additional problems here are that the industry classification that Stats SA uses is different from the OFO used in the workplace skills system, and the demarcation of the SETAs. The allocation of workers to sectors is not done consistently. Single-sector analysis cannot reveal economy-wide shortages as many occupations straddle multiple sectors and graduates routinely work outside the field that nominally corresponds to their qualification (DHET, 2013a).

From early on, it was apparent that the sector skills plans were a very mixed bag. Since 2009, the DHET has tried to strengthen them by establishing a set of requirements that each must meet, such as change drivers and the identification of priority needs (DHET, 2013a). The rationale behind change drivers is that SETAs should research where longer-term changes in their sector might emerge. However, in practice, it becomes another tick-box exercise, where a DHET official, with no expertise in the industries in question, or the ways in which economic change leads to changes in workplace and skills requirements, adjudicates the adequacy of a sector skills plan, by checking if there is indeed a section called change drivers. This results in sector skills plans with rigid formats and formulaic adherence.

Disbursement of funds to support provision and training

There is currently an underspend in the skills levy, which is at least partly related to the mechanisms for the disbursement of funds.

The sector skills plans inform funding windows within which SETAs allow employers and providers to bid for funds. This leads to further incentives for the identification of skills needs, but also to inefficiency, high transaction costs, and limited system steering and support.

Where funding windows focus on skills considered scarce, employers are incentivized to list skills shortages even when they have explained to researchers that there are no actual shortages (Allais and Ngcwangu, 2025). Employers also sometimes report skills gaps to obtain funded learnership positions, which are seen by more cynical employers as cheap labour, and by less cynical ones as a useful mechanism for filtering and screening employees (Allais, 2022a; REAL Centre, 2025b, in press). In both cases, the specification of skills needs is not about real skills gaps, but about gaming the system to create funding windows.

Regarding disbursement, the system creates very high transaction costs (Lee, 2023) and has many different inefficiencies. To make judgements against many different applications for funds is time-consuming. While some SETAs are efficient, in all cases, employers must find potential candidates, submit applications, wait for a response, and then wait for applications to be processed.

Further, what is clear from interviews with employers and industry associations is that companies are doing enormous amounts of informal on-the-job training, and that changing technology is increasing this and the amount of collaborative problem solving that is taking place on the production line. However, they cannot receive funds from the levy money paid for this training because it is informal, inherently challenging to quantify, and unaccredited.

Another problem is that funds are seldom used strategically to build and support institutions and forms of provision that really meet the needs of industry. They are allocated to programmes, not institutions, and are usually allocated for a one-year period. In interviews with industry associations, what comes across clearly is a widespread view that training provision has declined since the SETAs replaced the Industry Training Boards, and that more coordinated funds need to be invested in rebuilding the kinds of provision that the Industry Training Board model enabled. Related to this is the insufficient distinction between funding for short-term interventions, such as an urgent training programme for a new machine, and long-term interventions, for example, training more engineers and building institutional capacity to do so (DHET, 2022a).

Institutional design and governance

As pointed out by the Ministerial Committee that reviewed the SETAs over 10 years ago, there are governance problems with the SETAs (DHET, 2013a). This includes confusion between the role of the board in advising on fiduciary matters and the role of board members in ensuring a strong stakeholder voice in determining SETA priorities. Some SETAs have made progress in organizing the voice of industry through regular consultations with industry associations or through the chambers of the SETAs (these are specific to different industries within the broad sectors of the SETAs). However, the boards are clearly not sufficient, or even the appropriate mechanism, to create industry leadership out of the SETAs. This has also led to vested interests dominating SETA agendas, as well as occasional corruption.

SETAs are costly to run and have large, expensive staff bodies that, in some cases, lack professional skills and sectoral expertise.

SETAs are also micro-managed by the state (Allais and Ngcwangu, 2025). They are monitored by the DHET and receive their allocation of funds from the employers via the DHET. How the DHET has interpreted this role distorts and adds complexity to this picture. For example, the DHET oversees annual performance plans and adjudicates the strength of sector skills plans. The requirements that the DHET has added over time may have resulted from well-intentioned attempts to strengthen the skills planning process and how funds are directed to provision, but they have led to the bureaucratization of the SETAs and substantially weakened the voice of industry, which was the main reason for creating the SETAs. This has undermined the ability of SETAs to respond to industry.

It is understandable that DHET thinks in terms of government priorities and wants to see them listed in sector skills plans. However, for employers, there is a tension between what the DHET sees as national priorities and what employers identify as priorities, further exacerbating the mistrust of SETAs and weak employer engagement (Allais and Ngcwangu, 2025). In practice, this makes the planning documents poorly crafted because of the need to refer to a range of different official documents. SETAs are monitored and evaluated against outputs with no meaningful theory of change.

As discussed in the review of international literature, states with clear developmental agendas and a strong ability to steer systems have managed to ensure the provision of education and training. However, in these cases, the governments were driving clear projects or the industrialization of specific sectors. Simply providing endless lists of government priorities that are vague, poorly defined, not linked to projects that are being implemented, and without a very clear coordination capacity from the state, is not the same thing.

4.2 Other confounding issues

Broad-based black economic empowerment

From a regulatory and governance point of view, a further problem with our systems is the coexistence of different regulatory tools that are trying to do similar things, some of which are in opposition to each other, in particular, broad-based black economic empowerment (BBBEE) codes and skills incentives (Kgalema et al., 2021). Further, industry association representatives highlight how these different tools create many reporting requirements for employers, as well as uncertainty about what can be reported where. Employers currently submit reports to three different parts of government, with overlap in the substance, including skills, employment equity, and BBBEE.

National skills planning

The DHET has invested in national skills intelligence through two successive Labour Market Intelligence Projects: the first led by Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) from 2012,[4] the second hosted at the University of Cape Town.[5] Together, these generate the annual 'Skills Supply and Demand in South Africa' series. Despite this investment, the system still lacks disaggregated, sector-specific demand data for meaningful programme planning.

Public sector skills planning

Despite repeated statements about the need to build a competent civil service, a specific set of complexities applies in the public sector, which has three separate systems for planning: the SETA system described above; defined competencies and mandatory training from the Department of Public Service and Administration; and national planning under the auspices of the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation. None of these takes cognizance of how new public management has deprofessionalized the work of the state, removing the possibility of learning by doing (REAL Centre, 2022, 2023).

Other forums for employer engagement

In addition to the SETAs, there are many structures at a national level that also aim to engage employers. The Human Resource Development Council (HRDC) was created in 2010 as a key structure to link different spheres of government work with different spheres of the economy. The HRDC is supposed to guide and shape the human resource development agenda, provide a platform for dialogue and consensus building, identify skills blockages, and recommend solutions (Republic of South Africa, 2010, p. 10). There are 14 government ministers on the structure, as well as captains of industry, union representatives, and others. As explained by Allais et al. (2017), there is no evidence of actual coordination from this structure, perhaps because there are no real mechanisms to create integration or to hold the different parts of that system to account, and because the remit of the structure is so unfocused.

Further bodies occupy overlapping space in the coordination landscape. The National Skills Authority has a contested mandate relative to the HRD Council. A Ministerial Task Team recommended its disestablishment (DHET, 2013a), but it persists. The National Economic

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[4] A full set of reports can be found here: **http://www.hsrc.ac.za/en/departments/ied/lmip**.

[5] Information on the projects underway and results to date can be found here: **http://www.dpru.uct.ac.za/lmi-research-programme-labour-market-intelligence**.

Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC) provides a formal legislative consultation channel, but this can be adversarial rather than collaborative (Allais, 2022a; Allais et al., 2017).

In short, we have a multitude of organisations and mechanisms in place for stakeholder engagement, but actual coordination is limited and ineffective (Allais, 2022a; Allais et al., 2017; DHET, 2013a; Marock et al., 2008). High-level representatives from employers and unions report feeling unconnected from the system or dissatisfied with it.[6] This is confirmed through our engagement with industry associations.

4.3 Colleges

TVET colleges overlap with schools because much of their provision is at the same level as the last three years of high school in terms of the national qualifications framework (NQF). However, most college students have completed high school: by 2018, only 11% of college students were in the 15-to-19 age range (Marock et al., 2020). Colleges also overlap with Universities of Technology in terms of NQF level 5 and 6 offerings, although few students are enrolled at level 6 (Rogan and Isdale, 2022).

Policy aspiration emphasises that colleges should not be second-choice institutions for those who cannot make it to university or do not succeed in school. In practice, their role is inescapably residual. University enrolments are by far the largest in formal enrolments in the post-school system; TVET college headcount enrolments are less than a third of university enrolments, and likely to decline with the phasing out of the NATED qualifications (discussed further below) (Bawa, 2013; DHET, 2019; Taylor and Shindler, 2016). Throughput is very low across a range of qualification types, as low as 10% for some types, between 20% and 30% for others, and hovering around 35% in many of the best cases (Marock et al., 2020).

History: changing qualifications, funding models, and institutional form

Understanding the effectiveness of colleges and how they could be supported differently to improve requires an overview of their history, the funding models used, and how they have been linked to qualifications.

What are now called TVET colleges were called technical colleges during the apartheid period. They initially offered three-month courses to mainly White men and some Coloured men. These trimester courses were the theoretical offering of the then-apprenticeship system (Badroodien, 2004; Gamble, 2021; McGrath, 1996). The courses are referred to as the National Accredited Technical Education Diploma (NATED) qualifications or 'N' programmes. They were designed as trimester offerings because they were offered to learners who were employed through apprenticeship contracts in conjunction with three nine-month periods in workplaces. They had a nationally prescribed curriculum with nationally set examinations. By the 1980s, the colleges provided a route to a school-leaving qualification, if students completed the N1 to N3, as well as Business English and Business Maths. They also offered post-secondary education, with three trimester certificates, as part of the NATED package of qualifications (roughly equivalent to

[6] See **https://www.wits.ac.za/real/publications/skills-dialogues/**.

ISCED 5), known as the N4 to N6 qualifications. If students could obtain a work placement for a year, they would receive a National Diploma.

By the end of apartheid and the transition to democracy, the apprenticeship system was tiny, and few learners could obtain a work placement. The programmes offered by the colleges had become separated from the apprenticeship system and were offered as stand-alone trimester courses. They included a range of offerings, such as business studies, which enrolled women.

The colleges were directly funded and managed by the state, placed in the provincial departments with schools, and functioned largely like high schools. The lecturers were employed directly by the state through provincial governments and racially segregated departments and bargained through the bargaining council of schoolteachers (Allais, 2013b).

After the creation of the skills levy institutions under the Department of Labour in 1997, colleges could apply for funds from SETAs against specific offerings for accredited providers. To manage this, colleges set up separate units or departments, engaging with different SETAs with different bureaucratic requirements and systems, and through different systems for awarding funds, to obtain accreditation and funding to hire staff and offer new qualifications being developed. Mostly, the colleges continued to offer the NATED trimester qualifications. During this period, the student population shifted dramatically, from 60% White and 18% Black African students in 1990 to 12% White and 75% Black African students by 2000 (DHET, 2009).

During this period, the Department of Labour announced that the apprenticeship system would be entirely replaced by a new system of learnerships, offered through newly developed outcomes-based NQF qualifications. This meant that the NATED trimester qualifications would no longer have a role in the system. As a result, the then-Department of Education developed a new qualification, the National Certificate (Vocational) (NCV), as a vocational alternative to the National Senior Certificate (NSC) offered in the last three years of schools.

The regulatory and funding model for offering this qualification was somewhat similar to the NATED qualifications: colleges were given funded posts by the state, based on enrolments. In other respects, the NCV was very different from the trimester model of the NATED qualifications. It was designed as a three-year learning programme, formally these were separate one-year qualifications, including theoretical and practical learning. It was intended as a broad, knowledge-based, vocational qualification to prepare people for skilled employment and provide a pathway into higher education (Allais, 2013b). The NCV then became the core programme offering of the colleges. Unfortunately, it was removed from the immediate needs of industry, failed to integrate workplace experience, and the demanding curriculum, inadequate lecturer preparation, and poorly prepared students resulted in low throughput.

The Department of Education also merged the 152 technical colleges into 50 multi-campus institutions. Further Education and Training (FET) Colleges were established in 2003. The new FET colleges had substantially increased autonomy, creating councils with wide-ranging powers, including hiring lecturers directly. This was supposed to enable colleges to function as responsive providers (Allais, 2013b).

Employers did not want to let go of the apprenticeship system for a new system that they did not know or trust, and so the NATED qualifications were not phased out (Allais, 2013b). So, three different qualification types—the NATED trimester qualifications, the three-year NCV, and the new NQF qualifications—co-existed uneasily, with different funding, posting, and governance models. The NATED and NCV qualifications were funded through teacher posts, and managed and examined by the Department of Education against learner enrolment targets projected by the state. In contrast, the new learnerships and other programmes offered against new NQF qualifications were funded through the skills levy and offered by different staff hired by separate units within colleges that obtained accreditation from SETAs.

Two completely different institutional logics operated within the same institutions simultaneously: a bureaucratic delivery model and an aspirational entrepreneurial model. Lecturers who were teaching on both the NATED qualifications and the NCV continued to be hired by the state. Collective bargaining continued to take place through public sector bargaining processes. Completely separately, lecturers were hired on short-term contracts to teach SETA-accredited qualifications. There were qualifications with prescribed curricula on the one hand (NATED and NCV), and qualifications that prescribed only learning outcomes on the other, leaving lecturers to develop the curricula (the new NQF qualifications). The former made responsiveness to local imperatives impossible; the latter was unrealistic in terms of workloads and the professional capacity of lecturers. And staff were hired in two different ways, with little possibility for staff teaching across different types of programmes.

Changes since 2009

When the DHET was formed in 2009, it inherited a complex, cumbersome, fragmented post-school system. It had been recognised since 2000 that the NQF was not working, but the then-Departments of Education and Labour had been unable to reach an agreement on how to change it. The dysfunction of the framework underpinned much of the complexity and dysfunction of the rest of the system, because the quality assurance model was premised on the qualification model (Allais, 2011). After the eventual resolution of the NQF in 2009, the framework was changed substantively, along with its institutional architecture. Part of this change included the creation of a new sub-framework of qualifications for trades and occupations, overseen by a newly created Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO). The newly created QCTO developed a set of occupational qualifications, which in most countries would be called vocational qualifications.

In 2012, the colleges were renamed again, this time to Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges. The new name was supposed to signal a stronger focus on the vocational aspect of the work (DHET, 2013b). Their institutional form remained much the same, although they were moved from a provincial to a national competence. They continued to offer three sets of qualifications, associated with different funding models, levels of curriculum design and autonomy, and regulatory models. They continued to offer occupational qualifications through specialized centres or units. However, the hiring of staff for these programmes remained largely separate from the hiring of staff offering the NATED qualifications and NCV. The TVET colleges ramped up enrolments for NATED qualifications in an attempt by the DHET to meet targets of the National Development Plan (NDP)—an excellent example of how performance management using targets can have perverse outcomes.

Where the colleges are now

The TVET colleges have experienced an enormous amount of change in terms of qualification, funding, and regulatory policies, and therefore in institutional form, in a short space of time (Allais, 2025).

The governance, qualifications, and funding models to date have been complex and at odds with each other in various ways. They all have a council that is supposed to have employer representation, with mixed results in terms of the functioning of councils (Mzabalazo Advisory Services, 2024). Some have had extensive funding to offer specific skilled trades through an expensive project called the 'centres of specialization', which focused on a small number of colleges and a small number of priority trades (Singizi Consulting, 2022). There are success stories, including pockets of innovation, colleges with high throughput rates, and colleges with good relationships with employers and pathways to employment for the graduates, especially in specific sectors (National Advisory Council on Innovation, 2021). However, there are also serious problems within the system.

Some colleges are urban and next to industry, some are rural. Colleges were originally established around industries, such as mining, metals, and motors, and should reflect local economic realities and possibilities, at least in part.

There has been a large unfunded expansion of enrolments against the oldest qualifications in the system, followed by the introduction of generous funding for individual students through NSFAS against two of the main sets of qualifications. These mainly weak institutions, which are forced to enrol students with very poor educational achievement from underperforming schools, are constrained by a complex regulatory model, with a complex and flawed skills anticipation system as the main mechanism for determining programme choices.

Now, the NATED qualifications are finally being phased out, particularly at the lower levels, as is the NCV. Colleges have been instructed to stop enrolling students for lower-level qualifications, and the phasing out of the others will follow (DHET, 2022b, 2023). The official circulars referenced here are concerned with which qualifications are being replaced, how long the teach-out will be in place, which offerings will remain, and which new occupational qualifications will be brought in.

All of this implies substantial change for funding and regulatory models. The DHET has put interim arrangements in place. However, to date, it seems as if the logic of the system is that the TVET colleges will behave like private providers and will have to gain accreditation based on registered occupational qualifications. They will have to obtain funding to offer specific programmes, in competition with each other and private providers, and each will have to find workplaces to provide work experience. All of this assumes institutional capacity that most TVET colleges do not have.

Recently, community education and training colleges have been introduced, built on the public adult learning centres. They mainly still teach adult literacy and the Second Chance Matric Programme. Provincial cold spots for higher education, Mpumalanga and the Northern Cape, have seen new, but small, universities established. This provision is located in colleges in many countries.

5 Summary and directions for change

International research shows that technical and vocational training tends to be weak and very poorly funded in low- and middle-income countries. Further, in most countries, there is limited coordination amongst employers, which creates challenges for developing industry-wide perspectives on skills needs and training approaches, including workplace training. Employer and industry coordination and engagement are important, but difficult to get right. Decades of reform attempts in many countries have mostly failed to solve these problems, at least in part because of the logic of dominant reform models. These models depend on regulated markets in systems with limited institutional capacity of education providers and limited government regulatory capacity. Excluding coordinated employer bodies and occupational labour markets, employer specification of competencies is not a basis for the design of education programmes, nor their evaluation. Managing both intermediary and educational institutions through performance targets can be counterproductive. The former leads to the alienation of employers, and the latter is not sufficient to build the institutional capacity to provide the relevant programmes.

The approach used to build SETAs and reform colleges mistakenly relies on a governance architecture that cannot assure quality, let alone build it. The result is an overspecified set of rules and tools, which do not focus on institution-building. Instead of the state taking responsibility for carefully considered institutional design, providing support and guidance to institutions, and coordinating on behalf of colleges (for example, finding work placements for people enrolled in the new qualifications), it evaluates the institutions based on performance goals. The issue is not whether performance goals have a role in institutions and institutional management; clearly, they are required, although they need to be far more carefully thought through. Instead, there are two issues here. Firstly, the current performance targets are not carefully developed with appropriate technical expertise, nor are they context-specific or well-designed enough to record actual performance. More fundamentally, in relation to SETAs and the colleges, the state should not just see its role as evaluating these institutions, but also building, guiding, and supporting them. The systems SETAs use for disbursing funds are complicated by the way the DHET evaluates SETAs. Well-intentioned policymakers have repeatedly added unnecessary complexity, creating too many tools intended to do too many things. This has made things worse, not better. These systems are complex and have high transaction costs, which can facilitate corruption instead of guarding against it. Rapidly, a new bureaucracy and layer of consultants emerged with expertise in the systems, and not in anything else.

Incentives are particularly likely to have perverse outcomes if they are narrowly tied to targets, if relatively junior bureaucrats without discretionary judgement are assessing the achievement of targets, and if there is insufficient consideration of implicit structural incentives within economic and social arrangements and institutions.

At the level of governance structures, the system is too complex and costly. There are pockets of good practice among the SETAs, but this is not replicated across sectors and chambers. At the level of college councils, there are some good governance stories, yet also several bad ones. And nationally, there are multiple national-level structures with overlapping responsibilities and, at best, uneven competence.

There is a rigid and overdesigned set of rules and tools through which SETAs are obliged to engage with employers—the workplace skills plans, annual training reports, and sector skills plans. There is a rigid approach to the procurement of skills—SETAs making funding windows available based on sectoral and nationally designated priorities. Funds flow to the institutions that can submit applications, whether public or private, rather than flowing towards building provision models that meet the needs of industries. Regardless of sectoral differences, SETAs all have the same design in terms of governance structure. To the detriment of employer leadership, SETAs have too many insufficiently clear mandates, combined with bureaucratic reporting to the DHET that dominates their workflow.

We must start doing things differently. One key difference is an institution-building approach.

In terms of colleges, this means identifying the types of institutions that are necessary to provide education and training; what it would take to ensure that they exist and are robust, and leading interventions to build their capacity. Funding institutions only through student enrolments in specific programmes is not sufficient for building institutional capacity and responsiveness. Treating a national system of education and training institutions as a set of individuals in competition with each other also does not build a structure that serves society and the economy. Colleges are largely expected to deliver the same programmes. Except for the centres of specialization, the system assumes that all parts of the country are the same. Maintaining national coverage is a policy good but must be achieved by having institutions that reflect their localities and which can have different mixes of provision across NQF levels and types of qualifications. If we are to have a college system of significant size, it is necessarily going to be based on institutions offering a variety of qualifications, some technical and vocational or occupational in our policy terms, and some general. This also includes 'technical matrics' and 'second chance matrics' as important parts of the mix; the former should be offered in both colleges and schools, as older learners also need access to these subjects that are strongly valued by both employers who run apprenticeships and TVET lecturers. It is important to flag that this is opposite to the direction currently being rolled out in the colleges, of only offering occupational qualifications.

In terms of SETAs, we need to determine how to obtain more insight into the needs of the economy and employers in the short term, and what it would take to build collaboration and engagement in the long term. SETAs should be required to make this their explicit focus and should report on successes and problems in this regard.

Finally, in thinking about how to improve our institutions and systems, we need to recognise that we are not alone in facing these difficulties—of building quality TVET provision, of building provision that is relevant to the needs of the economy and employers, of figuring out what kinds of provision are needed by the economy and employers, and of having conflicting goals in our policies. All these and other problems can be found in numerous countries internationally. As shown in the literature review, it is difficult to get vocational education right. Vocational education is not a mass solution to youth unemployment, particularly because it is expensive, but important in key areas of the economy and specific occupations.

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