

A university education should not be the only path to success in SA

By [Francis Petersen](#)

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Unemployment remains one of the biggest enemies in the South African economy, and with education remaining the most important strategy to combat it, a university degree is undoubtedly one of the most effective weapons in the higher education arsenal.



Professor Francis Petersen | image supplied

The problem, however, is that a significant part of our student cohorts at South African universities is made up of individuals whose skills, career aspirations, and interests make them much better suited for vocational, technical, or artisanal training.

They represent a growing opportunity cost for post-school education in South Africa. And their presence necessitates an urgent, renewed focus on and comprehensive rethinking of tertiary study choices.

At our 26 public universities, we have become accustomed to the start of each academic year being marked by a deluge of first-year applications – with numbers that are completely out of kilter with the reality of available space.

At the University of the Free State, for instance, this year we had 250,000 applications from prospective first-time entry students for the 8,100 available first-year spaces across our seven faculties.



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This is a ratio of roughly 30 to one. Bearing in mind that many students apply to more than one institution, these colossal numbers are still indicative of an overwhelming interest in a university education that simply cannot be met by our existing institutions and facilities.

Perception of university vs TVET education

The solution does not necessarily lie in expanding universities' capacity, or in building new universities or even expanding online offerings – but rather in exploiting the full potential of our technical and vocational education and training (TVET) college sector.

These colleges have a vital role to play in equipping potential job seekers for the requirements of the world of work and ensuring a more integrated economy.

There is, however, a prevailing perception that universities offer a far superior education and should be pursued above anything else.

This narrow perspective fails to acknowledge the potential of certain individuals to thrive in non-academic pursuits, such as dedicated entrepreneurship, vocational training, or purely creative endeavours.

On the other hand, TVET colleges are often (wrongly) seen as a last resort for students who have not met the entry requirements at universities.



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These students often view TVET colleges simply as a 'waiting station' where they spend some time before ultimately re-applying to a university.

Making the right higher education choice

One should by no means deny the indispensable role of universities in equipping workers for the job market.

But it is important to acknowledge that a university education is not the sole measure of a job seeker's intelligence,

capability or potential, nor is it the only route to success.

When making a decision around higher education studies, it is important to keep in mind the unique characteristics of each type of institution.

Universities are marked by a more in-depth academic focus, characterised by critical thinking, research, analysis, networking, and engaged scholarship.

TVET colleges, on the other hand, focus on providing practical, hands-on skills that are directly applicable in the workplace, with a clear emphasis on equipping students for specific trades and occupations.

In both instances, successful graduates are prepared for careers that can be equally fulfilling and lucrative.

Aligning skills with job market demands

In South Africa there is a growing demand for skilled workers in sectors such as construction, manufacturing, and technology.

There is also a dire need for scarce artisanal skills, such as boilermakers, plumbers, and electricians.



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On top of this, the rapid pace of technological advancement has created new opportunities that do not necessarily require a university education to capitalise on.

Skills such as coding, digital marketing, and graphic design can be acquired through online and self-directed learning. In the end, the private sector and industry need a combination of skills, trades, and knowledge in order to ensure a varied, integrated economy.

The skewed distribution of university enrolments in the post-school sector results in an unfortunate opportunity cost for the wider economy, as students who were supposed to boost another sector are spending their time pursuing university studies that they may not complete successfully or turn into a viable, fulfilling, sustainable career.

Despite concerted efforts by universities to ensure the success of our students, it is estimated that around 40% of all first-year students in South Africa do not complete their degrees. A major reason for this lies in the fact that they make uninformed and ill-considered study choices.

Potential of a healthy TVET sector

The TVET sector in South Africa has faced historic challenges, with several attempts over the years to address and rectify them.

These interventions unfortunately did not deliver the expected results. TVET colleges are currently still struggling with the implementation of effective management, and efficient performance, and becoming institutions of first choice. In some cases, they are also battling with inadequate infrastructure and facilities.

An overarching challenge remains the creation of a better alignment between education and training and the needs of the world of work. Although there are partnerships between industry and the private sectors and TVET colleges, this needs to

be enhanced considerably with more strategic intent.

Government seems to have acknowledged the need to market and promote TVET colleges more aggressively.

Higher Education, Science and Technology Minister, Blade Nzimande, has been urging students to consider TVET colleges, announcing that blended learning models are to be considered to further expand accessibility.

This, together with extended government learnerships and internships for TVET graduates, points to a real commitment towards strengthening this sector and establishing it as a driver in addressing inequality, unemployment, and poverty.

Currently, around 500,000 students are accommodated in South Africa's 50 registered public TVET colleges.

This number is still substantially lower than the National Development Plan's target of having 1.25 million students enrolled in the TVET sector by 2030.

This will be in line with international trends to move towards making technical and vocational training more responsive to the labour market – increasing economic competitiveness and enhancing social cohesion in the process.

It would, however, be irresponsible and shortsighted to simply expand enrolments without urgently attending to the issues of infrastructure, resources, human capital, and relevance.

Combating prevailing stigma

The root of many of the warped perceptions around technical and vocational training can be traced back to the apartheid era, which was marked by the exclusion of Black people from much of the economy.

This resulted in very few qualified Black artisans in particular sectors, and an artisan sector in South Africa that was marked by coercive and exploitative relationships between master craftsmen and novices.

In short, vocational training was used as a tool for social engineering, keeping Black South Africans restricted to a certain level of skill and mastery.

Any efforts to strengthen our current TVET sector will have to start with addressing the archaic perceptions around it and firmly and deliberately establishing a new culture marked by accessibility, equity, and unhindered development opportunities.

Addressing career paths at a basic education level

Strengthening our TVET sector is, however, only part of the solution.

A major challenge remains guiding our South African youth on career paths that resonate with their inherent skills, interests, and aptitudes and that align with job market realities – and doing so from early on.

It is essential that more attention is paid to career preparation on a basic education level that is consistently re-visited throughout learners' schooling journeys.

I firmly believe that in most cases, despite a less than-ideal basic education background, our South African youth have the potential and the tenacity to make a success of higher education studies.

What they do need, however, is proper guidance and strong viable options in order to make informed, well-considered choices about their career paths.

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