

Reforming education and training? Lessons from development of vocational education and training in Kenya

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Reforms in education and training are the order of the day in the spirit of maintaining relevance in this changing world. This paper looks at the development of vocational education and training (VET) in Kenya at three levels: the past, the present and the future directions. A brief historical discussion forms a basis for understanding the trends in Kenya's VET. A discussion of the current state of affairs highlights the main issues that are at play in Kenya's VET sector. From the issues that are foregrounded in the past and the present, the forces that have continued to shape the VET system are highlighted with a view to drawing lessons for the rest of the world. Some of the forces that are discussed in this paper cover the political will and policy matters in VET, the broad aims of education and training, and the need for clarity and inclusion of all the stakeholders in all the stages of educational reforms. Lessons are

drawn for Kenya and the rest of the world based on the trends and issues divulged.

Introduction

Kenya is located in the eastern part of Africa, bordering the Indian Ocean, between Somalia, Tanzania, Uganda, Ethiopia and Sudan. The geographic coordinates on which Kenya is found are 1 00 N, 38 00 E. The country has a total area of 583,000 square kilometres, of which approximately 13,000 square kilometres is covered by water. The population of Kenya, according to July 2003 estimates, is about 31 million people (CIA 2003).

Kenya has had several proposals (Ramani 2002) for its educational system within a span of approximately 40 years. There have been the Ominde (1964), Gachathi (1976), Mackay (1981), Kamunge (1988) and Koech (2000) Commissions. This has been partly due to the emphasis the government and the people of Kenya have given to education and partly the way education has failed to respond to various national needs from time to time (Eshiwani 1990, Obagi *et al.* 2000). Education is considered as a basic human right and a basic need in significant parts of the world, including Kenya.

This paper discusses vocational education and training (VET) in Kenya from the pre-colonial period, during the colonial period, in independent Kenya up to 1985 when the education system was changed from the structure of 7:4:2:3 to 8:4:4, and from 1985 to the present. It then outlines the current state of affairs within the country with emphasis on the changes taking place after the December 2002 elections. Education is analysed alongside the political organisation, underlining the power that politics has had in educational development. The current educational system within the country is in the order of eight years of primary education, four years of secondary

education and at least four years of university education, referred to as the 8.4.4 system of education. This system describes education for those who progress up to the university level.

Pre-1884

Before the coming of the missionaries to Kenya from Europe in 1884, all education was taught by parents and siblings through traditional African education. Fathers, through organised groups of elders and villagers, facilitated and implemented African traditional education. The elders were the instructors and ensured that youth were introduced to the fundamentals of their tribe, religion and the practical aspects of the group. Some of the skills that were taught were in farming, fishing and hunting. Each group or tribe taught to the young the trade that was relevant to what was considered as the traditional domain of that particular group. These skills were a means of survival, hence responded to the quest for purposeful education. The curriculum, though not written down, was in forms of activities and experiences that provided youth with knowledge of survival tactics, craftsmanship, farming and oral number work. Use of the physical environment of the child was encouraged. This form of education was based on need. Fathers taught their children what they thought would be relevant in life. The key issue in this era was the situated relevance of education to the close society and the needs of the time.

At colonisation up to 1963

Between 1884 and 1963 was the second major period in the development of vocational education and training. The missionaries introduced formal education to the people of Kenya as a strategy for evangelical successes. The missionaries dominated the provision and administration of education throughout the colonial period (Eshiwani 1990). They had low regard for African traditional education, a notion that was meant to disorganise the Africans in order to convert them

to Christianity. Some of the other goals that missionary education was to serve were to enhance social stratification (Kivuva 2002) for the different groups in the country. Thus, education was to prepare different people for their appropriate roles in society. The missionaries with indirect colonial government help moved in and reshaped education. Their main aim was to make converts and catechists and how they could exploit natural resources. Education and training as a way of improving the livelihood of the locals was never a serious consideration. This was stratification that created differential political, economic, social and academic facilitation, with the Kenyans getting the least even though they were the majority. The Europeans and the Asians were treated differently – and better.

The Africans were to be given education that would enable them to take instructions from their colonial masters. During this time (Eshiwani 1990), it was wrong for an African to attempt to aspire to equality with the colonial masters. Education was not at all supposed to make people self-reliant, as it would then reduce the availability of the cheap labour that was available. This is where relevant goals of education were lost under the cover of giving way for better education; in fact, the colonial education was inadequate in quality and scope, although there were subjects in this new form of education with practical skills, such as carpentry and gardening, that were aimed primarily at maintaining the mission stations.

In 1911, the directorate of education was established. The colonial government intended to use education as an instrument for change. The educational goals and policies for Africans were the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic. This was relevant education for the creation of clerks and office messengers. It explains why chiefs were forcing children of the poor to go to the formal learning places while their children remained at home propagating the traditional skills. The privileged chiefs would not allow their own children to take part in the exploitative education and training, yet they never pushed for better education and training. By 1934, formal education with a

strong emphasis on vocational education was taking shape, but with a lot of negative feelings among the colonised, the Kenyans. For the African child, emphases were on Christian religion, a little reading and writing in the vernacular, arithmetic and elementary hygiene. In the practical group (Okech & Asiachi 1992), subjects included rural agriculture, arts and crafts, rural carpentry and domestic science. These subjects were taught not for the benefits of the African but to form a strong workforce for the colonialists. As a result, the attitudes formed were even more negative. The colonised saw these subjects as a tool by the Europeans to achieve their goals. However, this formed the highest level of education for an African child at that particular time.

The Beecher report of 1949 recommended some changes from the earlier practice. A small, selected group of African children were to be allowed to taste secondary education after which they would go back to the rural areas to help their fellow Africans or be given junior clerical jobs in offices. This was due to the fact that some African schools had begun to challenge the colonial schools. The other reason for this change was that there were enough European establishments in Kenya that needed people with formal education for better production to serve the needs of the masters (Eshiwani 1990). The 1950s were a period of political, economic and social change. Kenyans were beginning to see the need to have the right to decide on matters affecting their lives. The needs for education, freedom, better housing and health, and economic and social development were striking. At this time, the struggle for independence was open and in force. Resistance to the perennial humiliation and mistreatment of the locals by the colonials made Kenyans view very differently what the masters offered. This pressure persisted until independence in 1963.

The guiding principle in this era was education to serve the needs of colonial masters and to make the colonised understand the master as more powerful, able, righteous and so on. These small things led to

the establishment of a primacy effect that has hindered the formation of positive views about vocational education and training. Whatever was introduced at that time by the colonisers has never been viewed as a genuine attempt to solve a local problem, but rather as rewarding the colonial system's views, and hence most people have low regard for it. This is especially so with some of the aging Kenyans who are now leaving the front scenes of leadership.

Independence and up to 1985

The period between 1960 and 1985 had several changes impacting on vocational education and training. The changes were following various commissions' recommendations. This period is also marked with political independence; however, it was tied due to economic dependence and donor control. In 1961 for instance, there was an Education Minister's conference held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. One of the recommendations was that African countries were to develop trained manpower as a priority for education. Enrolment targets for schools, which were to be achieved by the year 1980, were set (Okech & Asiachi 1992). Education in this case was to be used as an instrument for change and Kenya followed these recommendations.

Soon after independence, the Ominde Commission was appointed. The Ominde Report of 1964 had the main recommendation that the curriculum should be revised to make it more relevant to the Kenyan child. There was also to be more emphasis placed on practical subjects. In order to provide the manpower that was needed, the Commission recommended that education should be planned in relation to employment opportunities (Okech & Asiachi 1992). These recommendations were helpful, but they did not deal with the situated view of practical education that had been established before then. Some Kenyans thought that it was their time to take the place of the colonisers; hence education was not seen as a liberator of the mind but as a tool for taking advantage over others, especially

the illiterate. Over-emphasised was the esteem of white-collar jobs compared with blue-collar jobs. This was another knock to vocational education and training, which mostly prepares blue-collar workers. The rich former home guards and chiefs of the colonisers tended to take the position of the colonisers. It was the era of neo-colonialism. Not much difference was achieved in the perceptions of and the achievements in VET as a result of the Ominde Commission, except the establishment of the technical schools, which did not provide clear pathways for the learners.

The Gachathi Commission of 1976 resulted in a report that addressed the issue of national development and educational objectives. It is also known as the National Commission on Educational Objectives and Policies (NCEOP). It redefined the Ominde Report and promoted a number of educational objectives, including political equality, religious freedom, promotion of the cultural heritage, social justice, freedom from poverty, ignorance and disease, equal opportunity for all citizens and equitable distribution of income (Okech & Asiachi 1992). The Gachathi Report contained the following notable recommendations. There was a need to revise the curriculum to make it more practically oriented. It also recommended that there was a need to extend primary education from seven to nine years, and abolish two extra years of secondary school, thus leaving only four. It was from this report's recommendation that the third and fourth development plans were mooted. The third developmental plan emphasised, among other things, the teaching of vocational subjects in the technical, agricultural and business fields. The fourth plan emphasised the teaching of science subjects in schools. These recommendations were not implemented until 1978 when the first president passed away. A shift took place from education to political leadership at the changeover, with programs aimed at whitewashing the leadership style, like free school milk being initiated without a thought about its sustainability.

The period between 1978 and 2003

The recommendations of the Gachathi Report were not implemented in the fourth developmental plan but they did impact on the next plan of action. After the new president took over, the need for better education came to the fore. The government appointed a working party for the establishment of a second university in Kenya, the Mackay Commission of 1981 (Okech & Asiachi 1992). The university was to be technology-based, which was a useful step towards rationalising vocational education and training. It is significant that the government also changed the constitution from a multiparty government to a single party system in 1982. This had little to do with the appointment of the Commission but was a change that muffled the feedback channels for the findings and recommendations. This working party recommended change to the education structure from 7:4:2:3 to 8:4:4, which was implemented in 1985 and is still the system. The goals of this system were producing self-reliant, all-round individuals who can suit any working conditions. The examinable subjects in primary and secondary schools were increased. Emphasis was on basic VET subjects in mostly primary and secondary schools. Another notable change was the conversion of the former technical secondary schools to technical training institutes, which dealt a blow to the VET sector because of the unavailability of pathways.

The main highlight of this change is that it took place in the top-down mode of implementation. Feedback, essential in any program, was shut off. For instance, a presidential decree was issued that the new system of education would be implemented and no debate was allowed about it. Kivuva (2000) cites the *Daily Nation* and the *Standard* of 29 January 1984 carrying the headline: "No more debates on the new system of education, the president ordered". The government took the education grip to whitewash the other ills. This change was implemented without the involvement of teachers, the teachers' union and the public in general. The costs of equipment,

teaching and learning requirements were too heavy on parents. This led to increased dropout rates and discontent within the population, which is being voiced openly only now. For instance, on 3 January 2003, the Kenya National Union of Teachers called for the new government to overhaul the 8:4:4 system of education, complaining that teachers had been neglected in the formulation of the system, which has further been criticised for being burdensome to both parents and students (Chisaka 2003).

At the time of initialising the 8:4:4 system of education, Kenya was a single party state and anyone of a different view to the government was seen as a dissident. There was a serious abuse of human rights with many people holding alternative or different views being detained mostly without trial. This made people refrain from airing their views about vocational education and training and many things went wrong. The second partial liberation was achieved in 1991 when the multiparty system was once again accepted. It was not without deaths and intimidation of those opposed to the government system. People continued complaining about the education system and, most of the time, a complaint about the education system was viewed as a complaint against the government in power.

In 1998, another commission was appointed to obtain views on the state of affairs under the 8:4:4 system of education. This was the Koech Commission, whose recommendations were never officially implemented. This was because the views of the people contained in the report were against the self-preserving political will. Education in this case was suffering because politics had taken the centre stage of the national will. However, in 2000, the Minister for Education and Human Resource Development announced that, in both primary and secondary schools, the numbers of examinable subjects were to be reduced, starting from January 2001. This was a short-lived remedy to a system that required complete overhaul. Aduda (2000) calls it “massaging rather than diagnosing” and reforming the education system. It was a cover-up so that the public would stop questioning

what the recommendations of the Koech Report were. The major subjects to be taught and examined in all primary schools in Kenya were English, Kiswahili, mathematics and sciences. At the secondary schools, the students were allowed to choose any four other subjects to make up seven with English, Kiswahili and Mathematics. Due to the nature of the loading, students were allowed to choose subjects for examination from given clusters. These clusters downplay VET subjects because students are allowed to choose only one or none within the VET category.

Vocational education and training in Kenya today

Vocational education and training in Kenya is viewed as the kind of education that provides learners with the technical skills that can be used generally in technical fields. It is designed to prepare skilled personnel for particular occupations or grades. Vocational education and training subjects are offered that start from primary school all the way up to university. These subjects differ significantly at different levels. However, the main offering of the VET subjects is at the national polytechnics, institutes of science and technology (IST) and technical training institutes (TTI). There are four national polytechnics in Kenya: the Kenya, Mombasa, Eldoret and Kisumu Polytechnics. These polytechnics offer diplomas, higher national diplomas and certificate courses in VET. Examples of institutes of science and technology are the Rift Valley Institute of Science and Technology in Nakuru, Moi Institute in Rongu, Muranga Institute in Muranga, Kiambu Institute and Meru Institute. The institutes of science and technology offer mostly diplomas and certificates, with a few of them now venturing into higher national diploma courses. Kenya also has several technical training institutes, for example, Kabete, Machakos, Nairobi, Thika and Meru Technical Training Institutes. These are the former technical schools before the introduction of the 8:4:4 system of education. They offer a varied range of courses, mostly craft certificates, and a few of them offer diploma courses and certificates.

It is important to note that there exists considerable confusion in the administration and running of the VET system in Kenya. To highlight one issue, the teachers are employed by the Ministry of Education, which has the responsibility of paying and recommending for promotion. However, the institutions themselves are under the Ministry of Technical and Vocational Training. Most of the students are mature, but the Department of Adult Education is placed in the Ministry of Culture, Sports and National Heritage. This kind of arrangement has led to VET being perceived as a most confusing form of learning without clear policy. It is a moribund form of education, although in the author's view the future of Kenya is linked to how VET policies and practices are designed and fostered. Right at the end of 2002, Kenya had a change of government. Thus this paper is significant because it signals what the restructuring of VET should entail. Reforms are now being initiated. Some have already been implemented starting with free basic education, which was one of the campaign promises of the third president (Aduda 2003, Kamau 2003). Kenyans now should be able to learn from their past mistakes and reform VET to be responsive to the individual, national and world demands that are shaping it. We have come from far, yet we are going far. Some of the issues that have to be addressed without delay relate to the policy in VET. This policy has to be based on sound principles and not political survival. The voices of the stakeholders should be listened to, understood and, where necessary, incorporated into education reforms.

The workplace today

While vocational education and training overlaps general education, it has a distinctive feature because it links with the workplace (Keating 1995). It is important that some trends at the workplace are mentioned here to form the basis for the planned reforms. The workplace is one of the fastest changing in the world today; skills and knowledge are the engines of economic growth and social

development (ILO 2003). The shift is towards high technology, service-oriented and self-directed work teams (Hull 1997). Globalisation and the rise of communication and information technology are having marked impact on organisations and the individuals who work within them (Mitchell, Wood & Young 2001). The nature of work practice is also changing, thereby demanding changing skill levels (Billett 2001, ILO 2003) that require education and training through life. The workplace is highly susceptible to technological changes in the world. In fact, technological changes and other changes stemming from globalisation of economies around the world are not only having a profound impact on the nature of work but also on the way it is organised and the skills it requires (Virgona, Waterhouse, Sefton & Sanguinetti 2003; Robinson 2000; Billett 2001). As technology changes, there is need for training institutions to change their ways of training to cater for the changes. There is also need for the learning to be viewed as life and for life.

One critical skill that workers require for the workplace is the ability to learn rapidly and be innovative (Virgona, Waterhouse, Sefton & Sanguinetti 2003). In addition, there is a need for people to have skills that enable them to move from one job to another or adapt to the changes in the work place. These changes in work require that workers be able to respond to new tasks and demands, understand new concepts and develop new procedures (Billett 2001), all of which make the work more demanding and place lifelong learning at the cutting edge. On this issue, Robinson (2000) further claims that continuous retraining for more complex work and the transfer of high-level skills gained in the workplace context need to be underpinned by attitudes and learning skills gained in the education system prior to entry to the workforce. The bottom line for this retraining and relearning is the establishment of a culture which accepts learning for all and for life. It is not enough to learn in school or a training institute and assume that it is enough for life. Skills are becoming obsolete within a very short span of time.

Given these perspectives, Whittingham (2003) proposes that VET providers should consider their investment in pre-emptive or just-in-time vocational education and training to meet market need when it occurs, not after the need has been established, proven and possibly moved on. In addition, they should provide trained workers who can articulate their needs, be aware of cultural differences, undertake problem-solving and participate in teamwork. These attributes challenge the common trend of having most training programs not being futuristic in nature (Peters & Lloyd 2003). Many are the times when training programs prepare for current needs, only to find they are obsolete by the end of training (Kitainge 2003). It is expected that training today should help participants in coping with changes in the future. Due to changes at the workplace, there is a need to have workers who are adaptive to new situations, can manage increased intensity of work as a result of competition and are able to attend to a number of demanding activities (Billett 2001, Virgona, Waterhouse, Sefton & Sanguinetti 2003). It is this reformed education and training that will produce workers suited to changing workplaces significantly influenced by technologies.

Lessons from the Kenyan situation

Some key lessons that can be drawn from vocational education and training in Kenya are the need for the following:

- (i) Clear policy guidelines detailing procedures for working within the VET sector. This is especially so on the issue of accountability and responsibility. The Ministry concerned should have the mandate of running the VET institutions and have the mandate of hiring, retraining and promoting VET teachers.
- (ii) Clear policy guidelines detailing procedures for working within the adult education sector. This is needed so that it is not the remaining energy after considering all the other sectors of

education that is put into adult education, but that this sector is given the seriousness it deserves as education for the largest part of life of the individual.

- (iii) Clear management and commitment to reform are part of the development of all sectors of education. The running of institutions should be by qualified people and not only by the politically correct people.
- (iv) Clear goals of education and structure of schools in general with VET pathways.
- (v) Industry participation in the design and implementation of VET programs.
- (vi) Clear basis of evaluation of VET by qualified people.
- (vii) Continuous review of VET to keep in touch with the world at large, taking into consideration world debates of the time.
- (viii) Clear pathways within VET with the offering of recognition of prior learning, so that learners are not given terminal education.
- (ix) Implementation is taken through all the professional stages, with piloting and an open feedback loop.
- (x) Accepting the challenges of the nature of knowledge today and acting to place the country on a competitive footing.
- (xi) Assisting people to understand the goal, direction and need for educational reform within given limits.
- (xii) Promoting 'education for all' at the primary level. This is a key to providing widespread literacy and a future of a higher level of education for all.
- (xiii) Reducing bureaucracy within government systems as a way of increasing responsiveness.
- (xiv) Embracing world trends with a strong national focus and downplaying political survival.
- (xv) Breaking down skills into small chunks that would allow students to enter and leave as their own financial abilities permit.

- (xvi) Separating examination/qualification bodies for the VET system from those of general education to increase efficiency in decision-making processes.
- (xvii) Allowing learners to take examinations for a qualification when they feel they are ready and not according to the time they have spent in school.
- (xviii) Establishing a research body to deal with VET matters and to facilitate VET policy and direction.
- (xix) Social education and information that changes the thinking that speaking good English is the key to development. Other non-English speaking countries have achieved this development. Attachment to the colonial language should only be viewed as a medium of communication, not promotion of advantages within local situations.
- (xx) Realisation that history is important but it is not everything. Those who were mishandled should forgive, forget and forge ahead without impediments caused by the ills that were committed on their forefathers.
- (xi) Including a strong sense of the “logic behind” and the “why” answers within VET, not just the “how to”, so that learning to learn will be facilitated.
- (xii) Enhancing the development of a reading culture so that education and training is not viewed as a domain only for young people.
- (xiii) Recognising that adulthood is the longer part of human life, and hence adult education should be viewed as education for the challenging part of life and not just education for the ‘unlucky’ ones as is the case in Kenya.

Conclusion

The main questions to ask are: what is the way forward for the VET system in Kenya and what lessons can be drawn for the rest of the world? For Kenya, there has been a colonial legacy and post-independence political interference, but giving up on VET is not a

solution. This is because we cannot live on history alone; there is a future with challenges. There is a need to move forward and use the disadvantages already known to create advantages. It is time that we reorganised ourselves within the strong political will that exists and discarded selfish motives to build a responsive VET system that can create badly needed jobs to drive the economy. The starting point is a study to establish the exact national position. With views from within and without, then agreement can be reached on the general direction ahead. It is important that all stakeholders are involved at all stages, and that a national system is designed that has national goals catered for within the global context. It is important, too, that the country is not left behind in global adjustments and trends. The VET system in Kenya needs to recognise that what is considered useful today may not be in the future and hence it needs to promote learning to learn as a key concept. The groups that have to be included in the VET reforms are the teachers, learners, parents, government representatives and industry representatives. All these partners may have to understudy a related establishment to find out how it is situated. The cultural, ecological and sociological underpinnings will have to be keenly studied in order to develop a functional, national VET system with international awareness.

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