

ADULT BASIC EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN THE TEN YEARS OF SOUTH AFRICAN DEMOCRACY.

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Abstract

In 1994 around 15 million people out of South Africa's estimated population of 42 million then, could not read and write. The system of adult education in particular was restrictive, fragmented and not accredited to any formal centralised department of education. This limited access to many potential adult learners who wanted to acquire basic education and training. It was in this context that in 1995 the University of South Africa in conjunction with the South African National Department of Education established an Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) Institute. The main aim of this Institute was to train educators in basic education programmes with which knowledge they would then teach adult learners. This paper reviews the reasons for establishing ABET, and the criteria used in evaluating its programmes. Further, the paper also discusses the achievements and some of the challenges that the programmes have faced in the first 10 years of South Africa's democracy.

ABET policy framework

The political context within which the Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) programme was established was marked by a transition from apartheid to majority rule ushered in in 1994. That political and to a larger extent, ideological shift also meant that in tertiary institutions, the training of adult educators could, through distance education, and face to face learning. This dual mode in adult education delivery had to have clear aims and objectives aligned to the goals of a non-racial society. This demand created the need for an ABET policy framework to guide the provision of basic education and training for adults already in gainful employment and those wishing to acquire new skills. In 1997 the Department of Education enacted the policy document for Adult Basic Education and Training. The Department of Education established a directorate whose functions were to establish structures to standardize the content of the curriculum so that qualifications of ABET practitioners would be uniform and would carry the same value within ABET institutions.

The ABET policy framework also aimed to establish quality assurance mechanism that would be used to harmonize assessment procedures in ABET programmes. To foster equity in and redress the provision of education, the policy framework also recognized the significance of prior learning among adults. These aims fitted well within the broader vision of ABET as outlined in the ABET policy document. The document envisages "a literate South Africa within which all its citizens have acquired basic education and training that enables effective participation in socio-economic and political processes to contribute to reconstruction, development and social transformation" (Department of Education, 1997:16).

Achievements of UNISA ABET Institute in ten years of democracy

Since 1995 the ABET Institute has trained over 20,000 adult educators (most of them from the SADC Region) through distance education delivery mode. Commenting on enrolment figures for 2003 the

Director of the Institute, Veronica McKay (2003:2) has this to say:

this year, the ABET Institute has enrolled more than 12,000 learners, a new annual record. Of these, 8,073 are new recruits on the first year of the certificate course and 3,562 are registered for the second or third year of the ABET Diploma. We also have 355 Bachelor of Education Honours ABET students and 257 students enrolled on the Local Government course.

These figures indicate the popularity of ABET teaching programmes at UNISA. The success of the Institute in its teaching programmes stems from good management and effective student support system. If these figures are anything to go by then one is bound to believe that ABET has registered some positive achievements within a short period.

In fact, in describing student support Simpson (2000:5) for instance says it covers "activities beyond the production and delivery of course materials that assist the progress of students in their studies. It covers activities such as organisation and management of student support including staff development to direct interaction with students as tutors, advisors, mentors and other roles". For example the UNISA ABET Institute (according to 2003 figures from the Institute) boasts of a "cadre" of 187 dedicated part-time tutors and 33 tutor co-ordinators on the ground scattered all over the country) who offer academic and other support that distance students need so urgently to cope with studies. These tutors are made up of 102 females and 85 males supported by 33 co-ordinators. This writer has been one of the part-time ABET tutors since 1996, working mostly in the rural communities of the North West and the Northern Cape Provinces. The information shared in this paper emanates from that

experience and those of his fellow part-time tutors.

Apart from the successes registered in the training of the educators and the provision of learner support systems, the South African National Literacy Initiative (SANLI) employs almost all the graduates from the ABET Institute. These graduates teach literacy to urban and rural adults in all the eleven official languages of South Africa. The participation of the ABET graduates is further confirmed by the fact that they also teach prisoners skills of survival as part of rehabilitation and re-integration into the society. In other words, the ABET programmes are making significant difference in the lives of those adult learners employed in the formal sector.

Achievements in non-formal sector

Through the programme called Literacy Plus which is lodged within the broader ABET programme, adult learners are equipped with entrepreneurial skills which enable them to start their own small to medium projects. These projects from ABET graduates have tended to be concentrated in areas such as the establishment of spaza/tuck shops, preschools, weaving, knitting and sewing shops in their respective communities. This form of socio-economic empowerment to adult learners in urban communities suggests that disadvantaged communities are also beginning to take control of their resources and contribute to national development in some small but effective way. In other words the concept of empowerment that the skills from ABET programmes demand and impart to adult learners are those that lead to self-employment. For example in Cape Town, Khaylitsha participants testified that they could now read, write, count money and have opened up their own small

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business (SANLI NES, 2003, 8).
Another participant in the ABET programme said that she could now read information related to HIV/AIDS. This is critical because one is talking about literacy empowerment and how it affects people's lives in the era of the pandemic, HIV/AIDS. Whether it is in Tembisa in Gauteng or even the Krugerdorp prison there is evidence from the adult learners that they have benefited from the programmes in different ways that affect their different lives. This phenomenal success of ABET programmes with urban adult learners is expanded to involve the rural areas.

In the South African context, the rural areas are far from the amenities provided by urban modernity. And yet it is in the rural areas where the majority of South Africans who need skills live. The UNISA ABET institute has realised this and therefore set up centres in the rural areas from which adult learners can acquire skills that they use to improve their lives for the better. Rural areas pose peculiar problems to the ABET adult distance learner. There are usually problems associated with lack of electricity which makes it very difficult for distance learners to study in the night and impossible to use electrical appliances such as computers (the internet), radio or television programmes in their studies. In addition to this, there are poor postal services. Few learners are scattered over a large area and a poor school system which has not prepared learners adequately for independent learning.

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Statistics from the Institute indicate that the majority of the UNISA ABET students are women who live, work and study in the rural areas with all the poor conditions to deal with. Touching on hard conditions under which rural students operate,

McKay(1995:16) reports that 84% of households in rural areas don't have electricity, 28% don't have toilets and 32% rely on rivers for water. These poor conditions could be a "recipe" for learner attrition in view of the fact that distance learners in such areas lack basic necessities and may spend much time fetching water, looking for firewood or food instead of studying.

Fortunately, the institute has opened tutorial centres in most rural communities where at least 15 students live and has appointed a tutor to offer the tutorials and support distance learners who may need to cope with their studies. The initiative of UNISA ABET in the rural areas has borne fruit in most rural communities such as Ga-Mothopo in Limpopo, Maluti Farm in Qwa Qwa and in the squatter camp of Bluegumview, Duduza Township in Nigel. In Port St Johns in the eastern Cape adult learners have started cottage industries such as knitting, beading and weaving. These forms of self-employment mean that the people do not have to wait for the government to give them jobs. In other words, the UNISA Adult programme of education has been well received in both the South African urban and rural contexts.

But the achievements of this programme can further be evidenced by the fact that UNISA ABET programmes have also been implemented in African countries such as Lesotho, Kenya and Zimbabwe (ABET NEWS, 2001, 20). These countries have benefited in the sense that their people have acquired skills that enable them to generate their own incomes thereby also providing the much-needed self-employment. Judging the UNISA ABET programmes from the achievements registered in South Africa and elsewhere, one is bound to

conclude that within the ten years of democracy, Adult Basic Education and Training has made significant strides internally and externally. However, these successes do not mean that the processes have all been smooth sailing.

Future challenges of UNISA ABET programmes

The UNISA ABET programmes face some challenges some of which is financial. The programme does not receive direct financial support from the government. The institute relies on foreign donors. While this can boost the programmes in other cases, this is a weakness. For example, in 2004, the programme was dealt a blow when the British Department for International development (DFID) withdrew its financial support. There are also problems of the programmes relating to shortages of lecturers at the institute. The institute is therefore forced to depend on the services of part-time personnel who may be committed elsewhere. Besides the problem of understaffing there is also the spectre of having to make do with some tutors who are under-qualified. This does not guarantee quality output. These problems have been summarised by the Department of Education that suggests that the challenges of the Adult Basic Education and Training sector in South Africa is to ensure that it retains its significance and importance as part of reconstruction and development as a basic human right.

Further to this challenge is the need to negate the tendency which views ABET provisioning simply as second chance schooling system and, especially that view which sees it as a second chance finishing school opportunity (Department of Education, 1997, 22). It is important to

remark that most of these challenges are surmountable.

Recommendations

This account of the activities of UNISA ABET programmes is by no means exhaustive. But it is meant to point or suggest the possible direction that the programmes might take in order to consolidate the gains made by the institute not only in South Africa but also in Africa as part of the New Partnership for Africa's development (NEPAD). On the part of UNISA ABET institute there is the need to keep on training its tutors so that they will be well equipped to teach the ABET practitioners. UNISA ABET can also continue to lobby the government to provide funds in order to improve the infrastructure for learner support. The learner support system would cater for financial assistance to buy books, and offer incentives to part-time tutors by waiving or paying part of the fees required to do advanced courses in ABET. The government can also provide UNISA ABET with other resources such as teaching materials, establish more tutorial centres especially in the rural areas, and possibly offer bursaries for adults who have the inclination to study through the programmes. Most importantly, the government could work with UNISA ABET and the private sector to harmonise or tighten the ABET policy framework for adult education. This, hopefully, would discourage unscrupulous people from exploiting potential adult learners by offering unaccredited and inferior courses, while pretending to be ABET practitioners.

Conclusion.

The aim of this article was to review and evaluate the effectiveness of UNISA ABET programmes in the ten years of democracy in South

Africa. It was argued that the political context ushered in in 1994 demanded some reforms in the Adult education sector. These reforms are to be perceived as part of the wider struggle to democratize education by making it accessible to every citizen as enshrined in South Africa's constitution. The paper argued that the vision of the UNISA ABET institute has, to a larger extent, succeeded. Numbers of adults who enrolled for specialized courses increased from both the urban and rural areas of South Africa. It has also been observed that Adult education has imparted useful skills to those adults in gainful employment. This has helped in enhancing productivity at their work places in the formal industry.

On the hand, those adults operating outside the formal industry also benefitted in ways that enabled them to open their own businesses. Within this group of the participants in the non-formal sector there were some adults who testified that after undergoing the course they could read, write, count money and even teach others about the hazards of diseases like HIV/AIDS. In the rural areas in particular, UNISA ABET programmes have introduced tutorial centres where people acquire skills related to the keeping of poultry, farming and conservation of the environment. Despite these successes, UNISA ABET faces challenges that have to do with the acquisition of finances to maintain the student support system and recruit staff. The paper concluded by suggesting that the UNISA ABET institute can create synergies with the government and the private sector in order to come up with a coherent and solid adult education policy framework. This would then be used to address some of the challenges outlined above.

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