



# Introduction

The task of building knowledge and skill at the intermediate level has, for a long time, been the appointed curriculum responsibility of technical colleges. For many years, this responsibility and task was part of a system of apprenticeship, which prepared young men and women, from one population group only, for entry primarily into the engineering and hairdressing trades. Later, preparation for various business-related occupations became the focus of many newer colleges, which did not have strong relationships with those industry sectors that supported apprenticeships.

Although the technical college sector was the last to be subjected to policy reforms, the process is now in full swing. Both the Department of Education (DoE) and the Department of Labour (DoL) have been engaged in a legislative process that has produced the *Further Education and Training Act* (1998), the *Skills Development Act* (1998) and the *Skills Levies Act* (1999). Specific reforms to be introduced in South Africa's technical colleges were spelled out in *A New Institutional Landscape for Public Further Education and Training Colleges* (DoE, 2001).

These legislative and policy instruments are intended to change the nature of technical and vocational education and training in South Africa, fundamentally. Once the restructuring of the institutions, and the governance and funding arrangements have been crystallised, in terms of the new legislative and policy frameworks, the curriculum will in turn be restructured. The controversy and debate regarding Curriculum 2005 that is taking place in the primary and secondary education sector is not the main issue in the further education and training (FET) college curriculum. The main issues focused on in this sector have centred round the low pass and throughput rates; the limited range of programmes offered; and the restrictive nature of centrally administered curricula. Further concerns are the lack of adequate workshop facilities and the need to include work experience in the curriculum. In the engineering field, the decline of the apprenticeship system and the subsequent lack of opportunity for students to gain practical work experience has added to the requirement for 'a fundamental overhaul of programmes and provision' (DoE, 2001: 12).

What is visualised and proposed is a new and dynamic FET college sector that can meet a multitude of needs. It is worth quoting from the *New Institutional Landscape* document to show the scope that is required.

The support for lifelong learning requires a network of FET colleges. The new system will need to work with different partners to deliver responsive and relevant programmes to meet the needs of individuals and the wider social and business

community as a whole. The achievement of our national policy imperatives of redress and economic inclusion depends on the existence of accessible, high-quality and cost-effective learning opportunities for young people and adults. (DoE, 2001: 6)

The implications for the FET curriculum of such policy statements are daunting and challenging by any standards, but particularly for those institutions that have a 'low status' history and a limited track record in terms of curriculum development. On what sources can the FET college sector draw to find the inspiration to develop and deliver the necessary and required curricula?

An answer that comes to mind immediately is that they will want to find out what FET colleges in other parts of the world are doing. They will also look towards the newly established Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) for guidance on how to find their way through the requirements for qualifications and programmes which have been set by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) with regard to the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). These processes are already underway, so this book takes another route. First, it examines the literature to understand how education and training are linked to employment and the economy. Second, it looks at current debates and factual evidence on how to translate the needs of industry and employers into meaningful changes in the curriculum. This approach is perhaps a controversial one as it lays itself open to the criticism that economic demands and an instrumental approach are determining the future of education and training. Can education and training ever provide only what an economy and employers want? The answer is clearly 'no' and a scan of the recent South African policy documents shows a far broader vision than one that just focuses on economic demands.

A successful FET system will provide diversified programmes offering knowledge, skills, attitudes and values South Africans require as individuals and citizens, as lifelong learners and as economically productive members of society. It will provide the vital intermediate to higher-level skills and competencies the country needs to chart its own course in the global competitive world of the 21st century (DoE, 1998b).

However, one of the criticisms of current FET policy documents is that they do not adequately address the economic context in which the transformation of FET will take place (McGrath, 2000). The need to be part of the global competitive world is acknowledged and so is the need for equity and redress, but little is said about the nature of intermediate and higher-level knowledge and skill and, particularly, what this means in curriculum terms.

The requirement for FET colleges to prepare their students for a world of work that includes both employment and self-employment as possible options also presents challenges. While entrepreneurship and small business management are currently included as subjects in a range of programmes, there is doubt about whether these subjects offer sufficient preparation for the complex task of actually starting a business enterprise. There is also scepticism and doubt expressed about whether colleges are, in fact, in a position to contribute meaningfully to

preparation for self-employment. If FET colleges are expected to take on this task as a mainstream activity and not simply as an add-on to what they really do best, namely the development of technical and technological capability, will they succeed? There is widespread acceptance that education and training should have a particularly important impact on the enhancement of informal job creation in order to sustain livelihoods. There are many references in the various policy documents, which point to the need for some form of change to the question of economic inclusion. This redress should focus on attending to the needs of the informal economic sector. How such redress is to be achieved, however, is by no means clear.

Even though we may wish it were possible, theoretical and empirical sources cannot produce ready-made answers to the questions such as the ones raised above. Practices cannot be taken out of a particular location in time and space, and used to serve as solutions in another time and place. Furthermore, all texts are, to a certain extent, ideologically biased in one direction or another. This bias, in turn, shapes the explanations and prescriptions the texts articulate. A wide range of texts has been consulted to ensure that the reader encounters a variety of views and arguments. Even though the sources used are restricted to texts available in English, which inevitably emphasises Anglophone (English) interpretations, they are of sufficient range and quality to provide a balanced perspective.

The first chapter examines the origins of technical and vocational education and training in South Africa, and traces the ways in which these roots have shaped curricula over time. In Chapters 2 and 3, the nature of the demand for intermediate knowledge and skill for employment and self-employment are explored from both economic and employer perspectives. Placing these two focuses side by side allows for both common ground and differences to emerge. In curriculum terms, they are, in fact, not as far apart as many may think.

The ways in which the messages received from economic and employer contexts, with regard to intermediate knowledge and skill, can be implemented in the curriculum is dealt with in the fourth and fifth chapters. Chapter 4 deals with conceptual arguments about the nature of the relationship between theory and practice, while Chapter 5 examines the role that language and communicative competence plays in the teaching-learning process. These chapters focus on practical lessons learnt by other countries that are further along the path of FET implementation, although evidence from South Africa is also reviewed. In the light of the evidence and arguments reviewed, the concluding chapter suggests possible future curriculum scenarios and argues for a set of curriculum principles that deepen, rather than dilute, knowledge and skill at the intermediate level.

It is hoped that the book contributes to building an understanding of the complexity of the challenges facing curriculum development in a sector that has been described as fragmented and without a common institutional character and identity (DoE, 1995). The educational task of designing, developing and implementing responsive programmes, needs a 'community of practice' that takes

into account economic and labour market debates yet still defines responsiveness in terms that can be defended on curriculum grounds. This, in the end, is the strongest contribution that FET colleges<sup>1</sup> can make towards realising the vision that guides current policy reforms.

#### *Notes*

- 1 Vocational education and training (VET); technical and vocational education and training (TVET); technical and further education (TAFE); further education (FE) and further education and training (FET) are terms used in different countries to refer to more or less the same kind of educational provision, although FET in South Africa is only partially synonymous as it also covers senior secondary schooling. South Africa is currently changing from VET to FET and the two terms are used interchangeably.