RESEARCH ON TECHNICAL AND VOCATIONAL SKILLS FACILITATING INTEGRATION INTO THE LABOUR MARKET

FROM RECONSTRUCTION TO DECONSTRUCTION – THE ROLE OF RESEARCH IN SOUTH AFRICAN SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

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Contents

Acronyms

ANC	African National Congress
COSATU	Congress of South African Trade Unions
DPRU	Development Policy Research Unit
EPU	Education Policy Unit
HRDR	Human Resources Development Report
HSRC	Human Sciences Research Council
JET	Joint Education Trust
NBI	National Business Initiative
NECC	National Education Coordinating Committee
NEPI	National Education Policy Initiative
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NSA	National Skills Authority
NSDS	National Skills Development Strategy
NSF	National Skills Fund
NSPC	National Skills Planning Cycle
NTB	National Training Board
OBE	Outcome Based Education
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
SDA	Skills Development Act
SETA	Sector Education and Planning Authorities
SSP	Sector Skills Plan
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WPSP	Work Place Skills Plan

1. INTRODUCTION

Skills development is core to the socio-economic development strategy of post-apartheid South Africa. The Skills Development Act of 1998 established a radical and far reaching approach to education and training (RSA, 1998 amended in 2008). Monitored and implemented through the National Skills Development Strategies (NSDS I, II and III) it calls for an improvement in the quantity, quality and relevance of education and training in order that it might increase economic competitiveness and improve the quality of life of all South Africanscit.cit_af ref_bf(Department of Labour 2005 ref_num3)ref_af cit_bfcit_af ref_bf(Department of Labour 2004 ref_num4)Established against the backdrop of apartheid which was characterised by a low skills equilibrium, unequal access to education, large scale unemployment, widespread poverty and a highly unequal distribution of income, it also aims to promote social and economic inclusion by expanding access and widening participation in a transformed education and training system (Department of Labour, 2005).

The South African skills development strategy contains five core elements.

1. The establishment of a co-ordinated institutional and financial framework to improve training delivery and co-ordination at sectoral and national levels. This framework comprises a number of institutions including the following: (i) The National Skills Authority, formed by restructuring the previous National Training Board, developed to assist in the strategic co-ordination and the development of the National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS). (ii) Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) established to assist enterprises and industries formulate and implement training plans, to link plans to other strategic objectives and to facilitate access to available subsidies. (iii) The National Skills Fund, credited with 20% of skills development levies, to provide the budget allocation to SETAs. (iv) The South African Qualifications Authority to enable qualification transfer.

2. An effective partnership between government and the private sector for the funding of skills development and for provision of aspects of education and training. A national levy-grant was established in the hope that work-based training would be incentivised. It requires that employers pay a payroll-based training levy with levy payments offset against grants to employers for training costs in defined areas. A system of learnerships to link education and work experience in a structured approach that leads to registered qualifications within the National Qualifications Framework (NQF).

3. Information for strategic planning to ensure that labour market information is adequately collected, analysed and disseminated within a National Skills Planning Cycle so that education and training needs can be identified and acted upon.

4. Employment services to improve guidance and placement services that match workers to jobs, gives advice on support, assists with social plans to deal with mass retrenchments and helps vulnerable groups access the labour market.

5. Enhanced education provision to achieve high quality training provision through a responsive, cost-effective and accountable publically funded education system.

The Skills Development Act established a single regulatory framework which on the demand side consists of the National Skills Authority and 23 SETAs. On the supply side are education institutions, both public and private, which provides schooling at schools (Grades R to 9) and Further Education and Training (FET) at either schools (Grades 10 to 12) or at FET colleges for Vocational Education and Training (VET) (National Curriculum Vocational 1 – 3) and higher education at universities. The goal being to facilitate access to high quality education and training and to enable mobility and transfer through the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) (Allais, 2003). An underlying principle for post

compulsory schooling is to bring together the supply and demand aspects of skills development in a manner that addresses the mismatch in the South African labour market between high levels of unemployment (particularly youth unemployment) existing at the same time as skill shortages (Bhorat, 2008; Daniels, 2007) with a large number of jobs at higher and technical skill levels remaining vacant for many years while organisations struggle to recruit employees with suitable skills.

1.1. Periodisation of skills development research

This paper discusses the last two decades of research on skills development in South Africa. It draws on the conceptualisation put forward by the HSRC (2004) which views human resource development as entailing several stages in the life cycle of the human including 'the transition to school', 'the transition from school and first-time entry into the labour market', 'traversing the labour market throughout working life' and 'exiting the labour market' (Kraak, 2004: 1). The focus of this paper is on the third phase, 'the transition from school and first-time entry into the labour market'.

The paper describes knowledge production in South African skills development across three key periods. The first, called the **Period of Reconstruction**, refers to the period between 1994 to 2002 which marked the design of the post-apartheid skills development legislation and the structures and institutions supporting such. The second, called **Early Critique**, refers roughly to the period between 2002 to 2009 which saw the beginnings of critical study towards aspects of the skills development legislation, predominantly targeted at the effectiveness with which the skills development legislation had been implemented and of structures and institutions established within this framework. The third period, called **Deconstruction – A New Moment**, marks the period from 2009 to the present with researchers beginning to challenge and unpack the assumptions on which the skills development structures and institutions are built. An important impetus for this new moment was the establishment in 2009 of a new Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) which has higher education, further education and work-based skills contained in its mandate (Mcgrath, 2010).

The periodization which we put forward for skills development research in South Africa draws from the nomenclature developed by Muller (1999). This is particularly so for the conceptualisation of the first phase, the **Period of Reconstruction**. In his discussion of knowledge production in education in the 1990s, Muller (1999) distinguishes between the role played by intellectuals in the South African liberation movement which he terms 'critique' and the role played by intellectuals in developing South Africa's post-apartheid education policy which he calls 'reconstruction'. Muller (1999) bases this distinction on the relationship between the state and intellectuals with researchers involved in 'critique' of the apartheid state prior to 1994 and in 'reconstruction' of the new democracy post 1994. Drawing from the nomenclature of 'critique' and 'reconstruction' he argues that the way in which intellectuals place themselves in relation to these two quite oppositional and polarised roles depends on the "structure of the intellectual field and its relationship to the field of power in any historical conjunction" (Muller, 1999: p.117). The relationship of researchers in skills development to the field of power is a theme underpinning the periodisation selected and the discussion provided in this paper.

The polarisation between 'critique' and 'reconstruction' was sensible for Muller's work as he was discussing the field of power during apartheid where the battle lines were drawn between those who were either pro the apartheid state and those who were pro the liberation movement and fighting against the apartheid state. Intellectual voices in the latter category were largely excluded by their commitments to the liberation movement from contributing to the development of education policies during the apartheid era. In a period of democracy, the two decades on which this paper focusses, these divisions are potentially more fluid with researchers engaged in some moments of their career in critique and in others in reconstruction and sometimes in both at the same time. The

division between voices included in discussion with the state and those excluded are also more fluid. A researcher or research institution may be included in one period and could in another period be excluded. This is another theme underpinning this paper, as the paper shows that research institutions and individuals involved in skills development research during one period where not necessarily involved in other periods.

Underlying Muller's work is the belief which this paper shares, that educational research can and does make a contribution. This contribution is through the direct exchange of research findings but also and mainly through dialogue which allows for the expansion of concepts and for the development of conceptual frameworks through which we view and understand our skills development system and the implications – intended or unintended – of the policies that we've developed. A key aspect of the periodization is the different contributions that research in skills development has made in South Africa in the different periods.

1.2.   Aspects not addressed

The space of this paper compels an emphasis on breadth of coverage, but this comes at the cost of important aspects related to research in the area of skills development. First of these aspects is the legacy of the racially divided and highly stratified education and training sector inherited by the post-apartheid government. Initiated by the discovery of minerals in South Africa in the early 19th century, South Africa's skills development approach is strongly shaped by its colonial and apartheid history. Redressing the legacies of this past was the challenge of post-apartheid South Africa and continues as a challenge to the current government in that this legacy pervades the structure of the labour market, divisions in quality in educational provision with the stratification between rich and poor continuing to follow the contours of apartheid and this despite an array of legislation and social support to address these distortions. The space of this paper disallows a detailed discussion of the effects of South Africa's political, social and cultural history on skills development today. Should the reader wish, useful accounts are provided by Kallaway (1984 and 1997), McGrath (1996) and Badroodien (2004). Critical for this paper are three aspects. (i) A key factor was the stratified and racially defined education system which preserved the best education institutions for White South Africans and provided at best third rate educational institutions for black South Africans. (ii) The racial segmentation of the labour market which limited black people to low paid employment through job reservation and residential segregation in an economy experiencing low growth and an over reliance on primary production. (iii) The skills mismatch between labour demand and labour supply which continues to co-exist with large scale and increasing unemployment, particularly youth unemployment existing at the same as skills shortages in key areas.

Second is the importance of research undertaken prior to the first democratic elections in 1994. While the focus of this paper is on research undertaken post-apartheid, it is important to note that the policy strands that shape and mark skills development in South Africa and the debates and tensions therein has a longer history. This history includes the work produced in what Padayachee (1998) refers to as 'South Africa's decade of liberation' which was defined by a close working relationship between the social movement for liberation, the African National Congress (ANC), and progressive academics (albeit not without it's tensions – see Muller, 1999 and Padayachee, 1989). For the demand side, an important milestone in the ANC's thinking about post-apartheid economic policy was the discussions held at the 1986 University of York conference titled, '*The South African Economy after Apartheid*' with selected papers published in the book '*After Apartheid: The Renewal of the South African economy*' (Padayachee, 1989: p. 435). This was followed by a number of conferences held outside of South Africa where progressive academics met with and debated the future policy trajectory of South Africa (Padayachee, 1989). Within South Africa, this interaction occurred in policy research networks and through think-tanks set up to produce policy recommendations for post-apartheid South Africa. These think tanks included the Economic

Research Trends Group initiated by the Congress of South African Trade Unions in 1986 which was to formulate economic policy for post-apartheid South Africa and the Industrial Strategy Policy based at the Universities of Cape Town and the Witwatersrand which included discussion on firm based training.

The National Education Policy Initiative (NEPI), established by the National Education Co-ordinating Committing (NECC), was launched in the early 1990s to produce an analysis of education options for post-apartheid South African and their implications in all the major areas of education policy including what was then termed as human resource development and post-secondary education. In an environment where progressive academics were steeped in critique but had no experience in policy formation and against the backdrop of the democratic liberation movement which resisted the undemocratic and exclusionary policies of the apartheid government, a key aspect was to stimulate "debate and discussion" by bringing "more views, interests, and forces to bear upon the policy-making process" (NEPI, 1993, p.8). NEPI drew strongly on the then Education Policy Units which were formed in the late 1980s by the NECC to provide a scholarly context for the development of post-apartheid education policy. The time was one of democratic inclusion, including intellectual inclusion, with the aim being to widen and extend participation in the debate and discussion.

Third is the racial and gender distribution of knowledge production in South Africa and equally so in the area of research related to skills development which was skewed in the early 1990s towards White academics and White male academics. Of particular concern for the present is that this gender and racial imbalance in the research community has only marginally shifted over the past two decades. The skills development sector on the supply side has a predominantly black student body. The FET colleges are 88% black with 75% African, 7% Coloured and 2% Indian (Powell and Hall, 2004) and 89% of learnership students are black with 73% African, 13% Coloured and 3% Indian (Powell, 2007). Whilst participation rates of African and Coloured students in the university system are still low, the enrolment rates of both groups are beginning to shift, increasing the bulk of African and Coloured students who are in higher education. The continued racial imbalance in the research community has implications not only for the topics researched but also for the way in which they are researched as the language and racial divide between researchers (mainly white) and students (mainly black) undermines qualitative studies, particularly those which demand in-depth student interviews and adopt an interpretivist stance such as life narrative approaches. The paper discusses the structure of the research enterprise in skills development and the way in which this has served to reinforce and disenable the growth of a community of researchers and particularly, a community of black researchers.

The research work undertaken after the election of the first democratic government (between the period 1994 to 2002) focused initially on understanding the structures and systems that existed in apartheid's manpower system and thereafter on developing policy recommendations for a single, co-ordinated skills development system. Much of this work was undertaken by the National Business Initiative (NBI), a non-profit organisation funded mainly by large corporates which aims to contribute to the social and economic development of South Africa; the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), a parastatal research organisation which aims to support transformation in South Africa through research; the Development Policy Research Unit (DPRU) based at the University of Cape Town and to a lesser extent by the Joint Education Trust (JET), a non-government agency located in Johannesburg. The Education Policy Units which were integrally involved in the development of South Africa's post-apartheid policy were only marginally involved in skills development research during this period. One aspect for this was the loss of capacity from the Education Policy Units and the universities more widely with researchers recruited to undertake positions in government. The then Minister of Education, for example, was drawn from the University of KwaZulu Natal, the Director of the Human Resources Division at the HSRC from the University of the Western Cape and the Director of the division at the NBI which undertook the work into FET colleges from the EPU based at the University of the Western Cape. Another was the emphasis of the EPUs on Higher Education and schooling.

The research undertaken in this period, with few exceptions, privileged quantitative methodologies and when qualitative methods were utilised these eschewed interpretivist approaches in favour of descriptive 'hard data' on which policy could be built. All the research was funded either directly by government, or by donors and businesses working in partnership with government, and aimed to help the Departments of Education and Labour implement the FET and Skills Development Acts and related policies such as the Skills Development Levies Act. The focus was on developing indicators that would function as a baseline against which the transformation of the sector could be measured. This resulted in the research privileging applied approaches above theoretical studies (Mcgrath, 2008) and quantitative above qualitative approaches.

2.1.   Supporting policy development

The development of management systems to replace the differentiated and segregated management systems of apartheid was an important initial task for post-apartheid South Africa to achieve a single, coordinated system. The management information systems (MIS) inherited from apartheid was inadequate to the task. Segregated across racial groups, and across the prior homelands and South Africa, it ignored information on black South Africans and neglected important efficiency indicators. A key task for South Africa's first democratically elected government was to develop information systems on the supply side from schools, higher education and further education and on the demand side from enterprises. On the flip side, and equally important, was the need to develop institutional management systems that could provide the data required at sector and at enterprise level. The goal was to establish an MIS that could inform the National Skills Planning Cycle which allowed for target and goal setting through the National Skills Development Strategies (NSDS) which was to be followed by periods of monitoring and review. Thus far NSDS I and II have been produced and NSDS III was released in 2010.

2.2.   Skills reports from SETAs

On the demand side, a key aspect of government's information for planning purpose is provided by the Sector Skills Plans (SSPs) which are collated at sector level by the SETAs and provided as an annual SSP to national government. SSPs exist as one key step in the National Skills Planning Cycle and also in each sector's Skills Planning Cycle. The SSP has three main purposes: (i) to provide data to strategically plan skills development; (ii) to provide an annual opportunity to monitor progress in skills development and (iii) to develop with key stakeholders a collective vision and strategy for skills development. SSPs are collated from enterprise level Work Place Skills Plans (WPSP) submitted to the SETA by all enterprises in the sector. The Work Place Skills Plans (WPSP) provides information on the training provided by the enterprise for its employees in the previous 12 months, the predicted training requirements for the forthcoming year and critical skills shortages.

The development of SSPs, while a useful source of information and a key aspect of the National Skills Planning Cycle, is beset with problems. The first and biggest problem rests in the limited capacity available to analyse and manage the large database of WSP that SETAs receive. Compounding this is the difficulty of articulation between the data management systems of enterprises and that of SETAs. Murock et al (2008) argue that while SETAs are on a 'positive trajectory'; these problems continue and are a result of the "SETAs and the Skills Development System [being] at a critical [and early] stage of institutionalisation" (Murock et al, 2008: p.2).   Another, and probably more important concern is that SSPs provide a collated listing of training needs and skill shortages and therefore are compelled to generalise critical skill shortages and training needs. A criticism from education and training providers is that these reports have been generalised to the point where they not useful for designing education and training responses to these needs.

Nonetheless, and despite these problems, the SSPs have made a huge contribution to data collection on sector skills needs. Daniels (2007) makes the point that this data provides essential information on the relationship between "micro (firm) level data, sectoral aggregation via the Sector Skills Plans, and the national aggregation" and by so doing "represents a highly coherent framework for (firm-level) data collection that facilitates both the analysis and implementation of policy" (Daniels, 2007: p.5). As argued by Daniels (2007), without the data from the SSPs and WSPs much secondary analysis would not have been possible. The learnership study undertaken in 1997, for example, utilised the SETA databases to compile a database of learnership graduates (Powell, 2007) and Atmore E. (2001) utilised the SSPs to provide an assessment of the training needs of early childhood development practioners.

2.3.   Further Education and Training colleges

A central component of the supply side of the skills development strategy is the provision of intermediate to higher level skills through Vocational Education and Training (VET). Here the public FET colleges have a critical role to play. Constituted formally in 2002 with the declaration of 50 colleges formed by merging the former 152 technical colleges with colleges of education and skills centres, the sector exists at the cross roads between school, higher education and the world of work. It has as its remit the task of providing intermediate to higher level skills that respond to the training needs of the global economy whilst simultaneously providing access to learners from disadvantaged backgrounds (Fisher, et al, 2003). In addition to, and overlapping with the above, it is to train for entrepreneurial work and the skills shortages existing within local economies and the country as a whole (Badrodien and Kraak, 2006).

Between 1998 and 2004 the NBI managed the Colleges Collaboration Fund, a R120 million business funded project (although in partnership with government) that aimed to support the Department of Education with the transformation of technical colleges into FET college sector. Research was a key part of the work of the Colleges Collaboration Fund which included situational analyses of the Technical Colleges in each of the nine provinces except Kwazulu Natal which was undertaken by the HSRC (Kraak and Hall, 1997). These studies included qualitative and quantitative components. The qualitative components drew on focus group interviews held with the college management teams, teaching staff and students and compared the current status of the technical colleges with the requirements of the FET Act and determined their capacity for transformation (Fisher et al, 1998; Jaffe 2000a, 2000b, 2000c, 2000d). The quantitative component developed a set of key indicators to describe management and governance approaches, college partnerships, student and staff profiles and college infrastructure (Powell and Hall, 2000, 2002 and 2004). During the same period the HSRC undertook a tracer study of engineering graduates (Cosser, 2003).

These applied research studies were essential for the development of the FET college sector as very little was known about the technical colleges which were to form the core of the sector. The only available information was provided by the De Lange Commission appointed by the apartheid government in the 1980s. This was particularly so for the Historically Black Technical Colleges that the De Lange Commission largely ignored and for which little statistical records were available. The research task was to service the transformation agenda by providing the information and statistics required to transform the racially divided and disparate Technical Colleges into a single co-ordinated FET college system. Together these reports painted a picture of narrow college provision with over 80% enrolled in two programmatic fields: Engineering and Business Studies (Powell and Hall, 2000, 2002, 2004); provision of poor quality (Fisher et al, 1998; Kraak and Hall, 1999); limited capacity at management and teaching levels (Fisher and Jaff, 1998; Kraak and Hall, 1999) and institutions marked by racial and gender inequalities (Powell and Hall, 2000, 2002, 2004).

2.4.   The neglect of academic research during this time

Very little academic research was produced on skills development during this period. In the area of Vocational Education and Training (FET colleges in South Africa) a small number of Masters and Doctoral thesis were produced amounting, from a literature search on SABINET and QUEST, to less than ten in total. These thesis were produced at South African universities with the exception of one produced at the University of Edinburgh. These studies focused on topics related to the transformation of the skills sector by examining the *Changing discourses in education and training* (McGrath, 1996); the *Repositioning of technical colleges within the transformation of education in South Africa* (Van Der Merwe, 2000) and strategies for implementing aspects of the FET Act of 1998 such as the student support services and learning content.

The exceptions, in terms of academic research, were in areas where skills development policies addressed the education and training sector as a whole and therefore had implications for schooling and higher education. For example, Outcomes Based Education (OBE), the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). Here criticisms from the academic community rested on concerns that the development approach adopted was defined within the market driven approach of neoliberalism which, researchers argue, would not result in the social inclusion and poverty alleviation aimed for.

South Africa's neglect of a more academic literature is explained partly by an understanding of the social conditions of educational knowledge production in South Africa in the 1990s and early 2000s. Muller (2000) shows that in the South African context, apartheid largely excluded the possibility of any engagement between the Apartheid State and progressive academics – 'the road to the state was closed' (Morphet, 1986 cited in Muller, 2000: p.118). Academics distanced themselves from the

State with the "tenor of progressive educational politics in South Africa (being) that of oppositional politics since at least Soweto 1976 (and) for entirely understandable reasons" (Muller, 2000: p.18). The end of Apartheid saw a marked shift in position. The emphasis was now not on critiquing the Apartheid State, but on constructing a democratic State.

> "The slogan *from critique to reconstruction* was already a cliché. Everywhere, from every side, not only policy think-tanks but also non-governmental organisations and academics were being enjoined to leave aside 'critique' and to embrace 'reconstruction' (Chrisholm, 1992) … by 1992, 'reconstruction' had become serious business in South Africa" (Muller, 2000: p.123).

The shift from critique to reconstruction changed the relationship of progressive South African academics with 'the field of power'. There was little time and certainly no patience in this period for engagement with oppositional academia with the attitude being that, "there (was) serious work to be done … people's well-being depends upon it and the doubters must keep out of the way" (Muller, 2000: p.127).

The relationship in South Africa of educational academics with the democratic state was (and to some extent still is) markedly different from the relationship which academics in many developed countries such as the United Kingdom have with the state. While the 'progressives' of South Africa struggled to 'reconstruct' a democratic society and worked in partnership with the State to achieve this, in the United Kingdom the battle lines between intellectual work and policy work were drawn (Young, 2007). So, while progressive British academics working in the area of skills development battled the state in the late 1990s and early 2000s South African progressives contributed to the development and implementation of South Africa's skills revolution.

Another reason for the limited research on skills development can be found in the size and shape of the research community. While researchers focussing on skills development existed as a small pool of researchers located outside of the research community at the few enterprises listed above, higher education had a stable research community based at a number of institutions including government departments, education faculties and university research units. This is even more so when compared to the research community dedicated to South African schooling that has a long and established research tradition. Unlike higher education and schooling, very little skills development research was (and currently is) undertaken by university academics. Mcgrath (2008), expressing concern at the research capacity available to FET, challenged the academic education community by asking,

> "what school or faculty of education deserves the name if it knows nothing about a part of education that serves well over a million students across the public and private components?".

His concern is supported at the international level by Winch (2000) who commented that "anyone interested in promoting (and understanding) vocational education is thought to be a philistine" (Winch, 2000: p1). Winch argues further,

> "that this view is a travesty, that our deepest concerns with moral and spiritual well-being are bound up with work, and that any education directed at the well-being of the vast majority who are not going to live the life of the country gentry of yesteryear needs to concern itself with preparation for work in the broadest sense" (Winch, 2000: p.1).

There is, in light of large-scale poverty and increasing levels of youth unemployment, a critical need to put the workings of South Africa's post school youth firmly onto the South African policy agenda.

3. EARLY CRITIQUE - POST 2002 - 2009

The period post 2003 saw a shift in skills development research with an increasingly critical engagement with policy taking place (McGrath et al, 2004; Kraak, 2004, 2007; Papier, 2006, 2008 and Sooklal, 2005). Much of the key policy frameworks had been formulated and were in the early phases of implementation. The debate in these studies centred on an "awareness that policies exist not just as pronouncements but also as practices" (McGrath, 2004: p4) with concern being expressed with the failure of policy to achieve its stated outcome (Papier, 2006).

A key concern of this period was the structural incoherence within the skills development system caused by the establishment of education and training in two distinct Departments of Education and the Department of Labour (Kraak, 2006, 2007, 2008; Cosser et al, 2004; McGrath, 2004; McGrath, 2010; Gewer and Murock, 2010). Until very recently, skills provision through the SETAs was located in the Department of Labour and education provision in the Department of Education. Mcgrath (2010) discussing this divide summarised the problems as being,

> "Essentially, two systems had developed with a lack of articulation or, worse, with a significant degree of conflict at key points. Thus, put rather crudely, the Department of Labour (through the Sector Education Training Authorities, or SETAs) had the money, whilst the Department of Education (DoE) had the key public provider institutions." (Mcgrath, 2010: p.1)

In this context, Kraak (2006) argued the importance of 'joined-up' policy to correct for this by allowing "cross-sectoral policy co-ordination and complementarity" (Kraak, 2006).

Concern with structural coherence was evidence not only at the Ministerial level, but at the level of institutions. The *Report of the study team on the implementation of the National Qualifications Framework,* whilst positive about the goals of the NQF, noted "considerable tension and disagreement about the respective roles of the main institutional actors, including SAQA itself" (McGrath, 2005: p.144). Lundall (2003) notes that while workplace training as funded through the skills levy represents a significant improvement to what existed during apartheid that administrative delays in establishing the institutional structures resulted in significant delays in meeting the training targets stipulated in the NSDS.

A crucial contribution to research in this period was the production by the HSRC of two Human Resources Development Reviews (HRDR) in 2004 and 2008. Drawing on Finegold and Soskice's (1998) language of a High Skills Equilibrium (HSEq) and a Low Skills Equilibrium (LSEq), HRDR 2004 argued for a multi-pronged skill development strategy which creates "labour-absorbing, low-skill employment on a large scale, alongside the expansion of higher value-adding exports" (Kraak, 2004: p. 32). The major contribution of this debate was that it developed a logic counter to that of HSEq with its emphasis on 'knowledge workers' by arguing for a modified discourse in the South Africa context of 'higher skills for all' (McGrath, 2004). In support of this argument the directory examines the skills deficits in each of the three skills bands: low, intermediate and high level skill bands and argues that skills deficits are located not only in the high skills bands, as proponents of the HSEq approach would assume, but also at the intermediate skills band and even at the low skill band. Here an enormous contribution was the finding that gross inefficiencies continued to exist within the system which included high numbers of learners either repeating school grades or dropping out of school and a decrease in the overall school population (HSRC, 2004: p. 23). At post compulsory schooling, the report found that 81% entered the FET colleges with a Grade 12 and exited with a N3 certificate (an equivalent and not higher qualification) constituting a regressing to a lower level of learning on entering the FET college (Fisher et al, 2003).

The second HRDR, produced in 2008, argues that a significant "'misalignment' exists between the need of the growing South African economy and "the effects of 'expansion saturation' within the South African system of education and training in the period 2000-2005" (HSRC, 2009: 1). The core argument is that South Africa's strong economic growth (of 5%) is not matched by equivalent growth in education and training outputs and, even further, is potentially threatened by 'expansion saturation' in supply-side institutions which are proving unable to provide the quantity and quality of skills required to sustain and further economic growth (HSRC, 2009: 1).

3.1.   FET colleges

The period between the establishment of the FET colleges in 2002 and 2006 saw the consolidation of the FET college sector, with the appointment of college principals, the development of common management systems across the college sector and the resolution and training of college councils. In 2005, a R1.9 billion Recapitalisation Fund was made available to overhaul outmoded college infrastructure and facilities. 2006 to 2007 saw another major shift with the NATED programmes traditionally offered by FET colleges replaced by the National Certificate Vocational (NCV) programmes. These programmes provide training at National Qualifications Framework levels 2,3, and 4 in areas identified as skills shortages by the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative of South Africa (AsgiSA). The programmes offered across 11 fields and for more than 50 qualifications aim to integrate theoretical and practical components of vocational education.

In 2006 the FET Colleges Act which provides the regulatory framework for the FET college sector was passed. The Act establishes the principles and mechanisms by which FET colleges, as compared to schools, are to be managed, governed and funded and by so doing seeks to bring uniformity in the legislation related to FET colleges. In the same year, a R600 million government funded FET College Bursary Scheme was established. Later in 2006, the National Plan for Further Education and Training Colleges in South Africa was released by the Department of Education. The Act establishes the principles and mechanisms by which FET colleges, as compared to schools, are to be managed, governed and funded and by so doing seeks to bring uniformity in the legislation related to FET colleges.

The period post 2004 saw a shift in FET research with an increasingly critical engagement with policy taking place (McGrath et al, 2004, 2005; Kraak, 2004, 2007; Papier, 2006, 2008) and Sooklal, 2005). The focus was on the failure of FET policies to achieve its outcomes and on "the mismatch between policy and reality" (Papier, 2006: p.5). As stated by Papier (2006),

> "Vocational qualifications need to become desirable because they offer real learning and real skills, inspire confidence among employers, are affordable by the masses who need training, and because the learning pathway is clearly signposted. This is what the policy has promised, but it seems we are still a long way off from achieving it.   …   I want to make an earnest appeal for an appraisal of the mismatch between policy and reality." (Papier, 2006: p.5)

Research highlighted this "mismatch between policy and reality" (Papier, 2006: p.5) by focussing on education and training policies and the implications thereof for FET colleges (McGrath, 1996; McGrath, 2004; McGrath, 2010). McGrath (2004) critiques FET policy for ignoring the "economic context" within which the transformations cited in the FET Green Paper and FET Act were to be achieved. For him a key concern, in light of large scale unemployment, is the role that FET colleges are to play in skills development targeted at the informal sector. A smaller body of work, frequently overlapping with the above, focuses on the relationship between colleges and the labour market (Cosser, 2003; Gewer, 2009; Pereira and Taylor, 2004) and on aspects of institutional development,

most particularly the formation of effective governance systems (Powell, 2004); management systems (Geel, 2005) and teaching staff (Jaffe et al, 2004; FETI, 2009).

3.2.   Learnerships

An important aspect of the skills development strategy is the provision of learnerships. Developed as a cornerstone component of the skills development strategy, the aim of learnerships are to provide workplace learning in a structured and systemised form; to link structured learning to multiple sites of work experience and to do so in a manner that results in a nationally-recognised qualification. In this regard, learnerships are registered through the South African Qualifications Authority and have defined competencies that are accredited through theoretical and practical testing (Kraak, 2007).

Learnerships represent a consensus model of training whereby employers (work places) and public and private training providers contractually agree to provide accredited and approved training for a learner. The learnership agreement is entered into by an employer or employers, a learner and a training provider. It obligates the employer to employ the learner, provide specified work experience and allow the learner to attend education and training and the learner to work for the employer and to undertake the required education and training (Republic of South Africa, 1998). Learnerships are to increase participation in education by providing access to learners unable to afford education by offering a learning stipend and to widen participation by encouraging lifelong learning.

The importance of learnerships for skills development in South Africa rests in a number of concerns that overlap strongly with that of the FET college sector. First, learner stipends aim to expand access and provide first and second chance opportunities for the economically and socially disadvantaged. Second, the compulsory practical work-based component aims to prepare learners for employability and to create closer synergy between education and the world of work thereby narrowing the gap between theory and practice and between classroom learning and work experience. Third, learnerships occur within the ambit of intermediate to higher level skills – the core focus of FET colleges.

Studies of the effectiveness of learnerships found problems inherent in both the conceptualisation and implementation of learnerships (Fester, 2006) particularly at the lower NQF levels with learnerships being stymied by curriculum and institutional challenges – foremost being industry's lack of commitment to work-based training and the unequal acceptance by the market-place of the learnership qualification (Powell, 2007).

3.3.   Academic Research

During this period an enormous growth in academic research occurred. The vast majority of these were Masters Thesis produced as part of a MEd or MPhil. Similar to studies in the *Period of Construction* these studies present disjointed topics, are supervised by different supervisors and across different universities. While many of the thesis focus on aspects of FET policy implementation and the success and failures thereof, a few began to interrogate and challenge the assumptions underlying South Africa's skill development approach. Barnes (2004), for example, shows that contrary to policy assumptions which argue for the importance of FET colleges for economic growth that "education does not cause changes in the economy, rather it responds to such changes" (2004: p.xv).

Allais (2003, 2007) provides a powerful critique of the South African NQF. Contrary to, and in response to arguments that focus on concerns related to the implementation of the NQF, Allais (2003, 2007) argues that the disjuncture in implementation exists as a direct result of the disjuncture

inherent in two competing paradigms that underpin the NQF: that of neoliberalism on the one hand and that of egalitarianism on the other. Moreover, that the increasing dominance of the neoliberal paradigm has resulted in a narrowing in knowledge as educators attempt to construct curricula to fit the requirements of unit standards and the specification of clear outcomes. As stated by Allais, "A notion has developed that curriculum is a mere technical process of working out how best to get a specific group of learners to learn the required 'skills, knowledge, attitudes, and values'." (Allais, 2003: 313).

Gamble (2006) in an analysis of what constitutes 'intermediate' knowledge argues that the "move from VET to FET may serve to dilute the knowledge and skills required for different occupations. Against the backdrop of a failed artisanal system, Gamble explores the complexity of curriculum development at the intermediate level. She argues the importance of maintaining a "stronger rather than weaker combination of practice and theory" which allows practical education to strengthen but not at the expense of theoretical education (Gamble, 2003).

Akojee (2008) makes an important contribution by highlighting that incoherence in the skills sector undermines the contribution that public FET colleges can play and, by so doing, opens up the space for private colleges. He argues that these private colleges exist as an integral part of South Africa's VET system and that they have an enormous contribution to make to skills development. By putting the issue of private colleges on the table he raises an important debate as to the way in which private education can be used to supplement public spend on education.

3.4.   Assumptions

While studies in this period studies critiqued the structural relationships established in the education and training sector, the implementation of policies, the efficiency of institutions and structures and the continued misalignment between education and training and the labour market, there was – with the exception of the academic studies – widespread acceptance of the underlying tenants of the sector. The most critical of these, imbedded in the transformation approach adopted by the post-apartheid government is the assumption that education and training can make a difference to the economy. This is not an unreasonable assumption as ample evidence exists to show a strong correlation between education and training levels and a nation's economic competitiveness and stability. But it is also not an uncontested assumption and simplistic notions of a linear relationship or crude cause and effect relationship between education and economic growth has been widely challenged. Wolf (2002) argued that simple beliefs in a direct relationship between education and national economic growth have resulted in educational "expansion as an end in itself" (Wolf, 2002: p.245). She argues that nations "extrapolating the benefits of education in much the same mood of boundless and groundless optimism as investors caught up in a stock-market bubble" have adopted policy frameworks that are ill conceived in helping the poor and fail to achieve the economic growth hoped for (Wolf, 2002: p.245). This is similarly argued by Ashton and Green (1997) and Keep and Mayhew (1999) who argue that,

> "attempts to boost the supply of VET without simultaneously tackling those
> structural characteristics within firms that limit demand for intermediate
> levels of education and skill run a risk of creating a situation where the returns
> from investment in VET will be inadequate" (1999: p. 134).

This is not to suggest that no relationship exists between educational advancement and economic development, but it is to argue that the nature of this relationship is complex and related just as much to the social, economic, trade and political policies and practices of a country as it is does to the education system which forms only one part of a broader socio-economic national framework.

A second, and related assumption, is that increased education will address and lead to poverty alleviation. Again, this is a reasonable assumption. The South African experience shows a clear correlation between educational qualification and success in the labour market where people with higher qualifications have a greater chance of accessing the labour market and also of having greater job satisfaction and higher salaries (Branson et al, 2009). This too, however, is not an assumption without its challenges and its nuances. Challenges here rest on the key question of 'what kind of education and training is privileged by the labour market?' Powell (2007) shows that over 30% of learnership graduates were unemployed and in some cases after a full year of graduation. Cosser et al (2003) in a study addressing the labour market outcomes of technical college students found that little more than a third were employed after completing their qualifications and that securing this employment took on average six months after leaving college (Cosser et al, 2003: p.86). Citing letters sent him by students, he paints a picture of college graduates desperate to access work and who, as described by one, would take "any kind of job that I can get" or, as stated by another, frustrated after repeated failed attempts at gaining access to employment, "[I am] not much of a college Graduate more like a College screw up" (Cosser et al, 2003: p.91). These findings are supported by Gewer (2009) who, through a tracer study of 1,532 FET college graduates from FET colleges in Gauteng, argues that FET colleges have a limited impact on the rate of employment, in particular the rate of relevant employment. A similar trend can be found in the schooling sector. The HRD (2004) reported that 51% of school leavers will fail to get a job. The HRD (2004) argues that,

> "it is likely that the actual or perceived poor quality of South African schooling (particularly in the formerly African school system) serves as a major disincentive for on the demand-side for employing large numbers of first-time entrants to the labour market" (HRD, 2004: p. 31).

While much has changed in the FET college sector since Cosser's 2003 study, the question remains: What difference does education make to the lives of the poor? And, more specifically, access to what kind of education is needed for education and training to make a difference to the lives of learners. This is not a new question in education and training and certainly not a new question in developing contexts and exists, as argued by Wolf (2002) as "quite literally the billion-dollar question for education policy" (2002: p.29).

The question demands a new engagement with skills development in developing contexts. What do skills mean in these contexts? And which skills matter? Palmer (2007), grappling with these questions in a study on VET in Ghana, noted that the training provided by TVET focussed predominantly on training for the formal sector whereas the vast majority of students (he cites an approximate 90%) will end up working in the informal areas (Palmer, 2007). In terms of this then, Palmer (2007) cites the White Paper on the Report of the Education Reform Review Committee in Ghana as stating that it "has failed to deliver its promise of comprehensively equipping the youth … with directly employable skills for the world of work" (Palmer, 2007: p.402). Over four decades ago, Foster (1965) arguing against crude aspirations for VET to fix and remedy social and economic problems, coined the term 'the vocational school fallacy' by arguing that vocational schools were neither aspired to by young Ghanaians and nor did they benefit economic development.

> "... a number of present efforts to develop technical and agricultural education on a large scale in Ghana are likely to be no more successful than their numerous predecessors unless such endeavours are paralleled by changes in the economic structure" (Foster, 1965: p.294)

The third is located in the notion of 'pathways'. The notion of the pathway was first raised in Australia by the Finn review in 1991 (Mckenzie, 2000). Since then it has been a core concept shaping education and training in Australia. Australia has not been unique in its interest and concern for

pathways. The OECD comparative report, (*Making Transitions Work, 2000)* compares education to work transitions in 14 countries showing that most countries have been "attempting to make the pathways from school to work more attractive, open and flexible, and to provide more opportunities to combine vocational learning with general education" (Mckenzie, 2001)

The notion of a pathway suggest a neat and orderly sense of knowing where you are coming from and where you are going and is used to assume a rather linear link between education and training experiences and employment. Mckenzie (2001) explains that the term 'pathway' has its root in policy concerns regarding the education-employment nexus. A result of this is that studies investigating education-employment pathways are generally applied, funded by government, and undertaken either by government research institutions or by institutions commissioned by government and for the most part utilise quantitative methods. Ecclestone (2009) argues that the concept of '*transition*' is broader than that of 'movement' and 'transfer' in that it includes 'movement' between and across contexts and 'transfer' from one environment to another, but also refers to life changing shifts in individuals in social role and identity. In contrast to this understanding of 'transition', the metaphor of 'pathways' represents a far narrower concept that reflects a linear 'movement' – in this case, from education and training to employment. The notion of '*transition'* aligns more closely to the experience of youth who, due to increased youth unemployment and increasingly complex education and training '*pathways'* are taking longer to move through education and training and into employment, or unemployment as the case might be (Evans and Furlong, 1997; Kraak, 2007).

This notion of pathways and the expected education to work relationship resulted in a number of researchers examining various aspects of 'responsiveness' in FET colleges. Examples discussed and cited above include Cosser (2003) *Learner destinations*; Gewer (2009) who studied '*Features of social capital that enhance the employment outcomes of FET college learner'* and Powell (2007) '*Labour market outcomes of learnerships'.*

3.5.   Research institutions

Despite the enormous contribution to research in the area of skills development made by the HSRC and the NBI, both research centres have experienced "a dramatic loss of capacity ... in the past five years" (Mcgrath, 2008) and by the end of 2009 were no longer as active in FET research and were engaging only minimally in research related to the broader skills development sector. The Colleges Collaboration Fund, the five year project which had provided funding for the NBI research into FET colleges had ended and all three of Divisional Managers involved in the Colleges Collaboration Fund had left the NBI for other positions. At the HSRC, the HRDR 2009 was completed and published. Other projects run by the HSRC such as the South African National Skills Survey and the Scarce and Critical Skills Research Project has similarly ended as has the Danida funded SESD.

Almost no new institutions have developed an interest and expertise in the area of skills development. Donor funding prevalent in the Period of Reconstruction had in the Period of Critique all but disappeared. In the Period of Reconstruction donors such as the British Council, Danida, the European Union and many others were involved in skills development research. In the Period of Critique, Danida continued to play a role through the SESD but many of the other funders had shifted their funding to other areas. A small research centre, the Further Education and Training Institute (FETI), based at the University of the Western Cape began during this time period but has a very small staff base of only a few people. The Joint Education Trust produced some work but much of this work is undertaken by a small team of a few people and predominantly by one person.

The result has been that much of the recent skills development work is undertaken by a community of competing consultants whose driving force is competition for the next research project rather than collaboration to address the real challenges facing the sector. The problem with the consultant model for research is well tabulated in the literature but is worth highlighting again. Most important

is that the consultant model is an unsustainable model which mitigates against the development of a long term research trajectory in a number of important ways. First, the consultant model mitigates against the training and initiation of young (and black) researchers into the terrain. Second, research projects undertaken by consultants produce no further value add other than the product or report produced as part of the project. In an institutionalised framework, research projects would allow other researchers (generally young post graduate researchers) to piggy back on the project and to utilise the data for their post graduate theses. Third, consultants do not have an institutional base to vet, review and comment on their work. They do the work and hand the work over. Nobody knows what has happened to the work and what the engagement between the client (the commissioner of the research - generally government or a government funded body) and the consultant has been and frequently nobody sees the work besides the consultant and the client. The institutionalisation of research allows for a broader discussion and debate around research projects as institutions engage with other stakeholders and are able to engage with government about the findings of the research. Lastly, institutions are able to support government by suggesting research trajectories that should be undertaken and approaches and methods that could best be utilised to do so. Research institutions, contrary to consultants have the capacity to engage in long term thinking about a research area, they are able to keep track of international debates in the area and through publications maintain a dialogue with these debates and the relevance thereof for their home country. Consultants are able to do very little of this with most consultants living from project to project with very little time to engage with international literature and debates.

This is not to argue that consultants are inherently bad for research in skills development, or that consultants have been inherently bad for skills development research in South Africa. On the contrary, in the absence of sustainable funding for skills development over the past decade, much of the research work undertaken in the area could not have been achieved without consultants. It is, however, to highlight the importance of developing a sustainable institutional base at which long term projects and sustainable research and researcher development can take place. It is also to emphasise that the absence of such institutions will define and limit the research agenda to projects which are predominantly descriptive and empirical in nature, lack theorising and will for the most part be short term in nature.

4. DECONSTRUCTION – A NEW MOMENT

Despite the lack of a coherent academic community and the limitations of funding, a solid baseline of research has been undertaken on South African skills development which include the quantitative approaches adopted in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Powell and Hall, 2000, 2002 and 2004); the focus on institutional, systemic and policy coherence (Kraak, 2004); the disjuncture between the education and labour market (Cosser, 2003; Kraak, 2007); the misalignment of the National Qualifications Framework (Papier, 2006; Allais, 2003); the impact of the learnership system (Powell, 2007); the structural, managerial and staffing efficiencies of the system (Jaff et al, 2004) and the capacity of staff to cope with institutional reform (Akojee, 2008; Wedekind, 2010).

The period of 2009 saw major political changes in South Africa. After achieving a majority in the 2009 national elections, President Zuma replaced President Mbeki who had been President for nine years. Two years prior, in 2007, President Zuma was appointed as the new President of the ANC at the Polokwane conference with the major concern being the centralist approach to politics and governing adopted by President Mbeki. President Zuma assumed leadership of ANC on the promise to open up the space for debate, discussion and engagement and to do so by "changing the way in which government works" and ensuring faster delivery.

Within the first few weeks of his appointment, in recognition of the weaknesses of separate Departments of Education and Labour and in response to arguments for a 'joined-up' system, President Zuma addressed this malformation by placing the responsibility for Early Childhood Development and the whole schooling in the ambit of the new Department of Basic Education (DoBE) and the responsibility for college, continuing and universty education in the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). The establishment of the DHET provides the basis for an integrated approach to education and training.

Minister Blade Nzimande, the Minister of DHET, was prior to the first democratic elections closely involved in the NEPI process. Drawing from this experience, and in line with the commitment to change the way in which government works, he is attempting to revise a system which uses the openness of engagement experienced in NEPI. He began his appointment by holding numerous summits including the summit on higher education, the summit on education and training and the summit on skills development. These summits provided opportunities for discussion and debate and provided the opportunity for research work to be presented and discussed. However, due to the short timeframes, all these summits were based on research work that was done a number of years ago or the opinions of people and personal anecdotes. As a result the debates and discussions in skills development, while useful, were not guided by recent and updated research. The Minister has also undertaken to have a Green Paper for post-school education produced. While the Green Paper has commissioned some research, the research base is mainly empirically rather than theoretically driven.

The establishment of the DHET has renewed debate on South Africa's skills sector prompted by a number of critical factors. At it's broadest level is a shift in the socio-economic development approach adopted by the country to an increased commitment to the poor and marginalised in the country, as stated by President Zuma at his inaugural speech, "Everything we do must contribute in a direct and meaningful way to the improvement of the lives of our people (President Zuma, Inaugural speech). A similar shift has occurred in the commitments for economic development with South Africa's new economic policy committed to the "creation of decent work" and promoting a "more inclusive economy". The commitment to improving the lives of South Africans has prompted three areas of concern for the DHET. First is the increasing number of youth who are not in education, employment or training (NEET). DHET (2010) indicate that 42% of youth aged 18-24 are NEET amounting to a total of approximately 2,872,196 people. Second is the pervasive and persistent

pattern of inequality that continues to pervade South African society and which is reflected in access and success in education and training. Third is the continued disjuncture between education and training and the skills needs of the economy. (DHET, 2010)

5. New research for new times

Much of the empirical research undertaken in the *Period of Construction* and the *Period of Criticism* was quantitative and, for the most part, funded by government or donors. While these approaches were useful, if not essential, for the construction of South Africa's skills development system and the development of the institutions and structures on which it rests, continued concerns suggest that a time has come to interrogate anew, and perhaps in different ways, the approaches that we have taken.

This is not meant to be a criticism of these works. It is to recognise the limitations of these approaches for the next phase of skills development. As stated by Thami Mseleku (the then Director General of Education) at the 2002 FET Convention, the successful restructuring of the FET colleges sector through the finalisation of the merger process and the appointment of college principals marks "not the beginning of the end, but (rather) the end of the beginning" (Powell, 2002: p.8). It is here at this 'end of the beginning' that we confront the limitation of research approaches that once proved useful, if not essential, for making the transformations at the beginning possible. And, it is here at the 'end of the beginning' that we face the frustration of policies that have failed to produce 'the productive citizens' hoped for in South Africa's 'skills revolution'. There is, as stated by Papier (2006),

> "No doubt, (that) the euphoria of our democratic transition resulted in an unbridled idealism where everything was possible if we only believed and worked hard to achieve it." (Papier, 2006: p.5)

This euphoria that she speaks of, in light of the failure of FET colleges to provide the 'employable' worker and the skills needed by the economy has led to "increasing frustration" and a reopening of the skills debate.

The South African period of 'reconstruction' is complete and a new time of 'deconstruction' has begun. It is time to consider again the policy structures that we've developed and the implications of these for social and economic development. And, it is not only for the South African experience that this 'deconstruction' takes place. It is, as Unwin (2004) argues,

> …the singularity which makes South African a value lens through which we can take a fresh look at some of the nostrums, such as the high skills thesis, which pervade the international debate on social and economic change. In particular, the South African context demands that we make a more critical, and possibly more sophisticated, appraisal of the contribution of vocational education and training (VET) and human resource development (HRD) to economic prosperity and social justice" (Unwin, 2004: p. 239).

In other words, it is time again for critique; except that now 'the road to the state is (not) closed' and active engagement is not only a possibly, but a responsibility.

6. CONCLUSION

The paper has provided a quick journey through research related to skills development in South Africa. Our apologies for any works that we failed to mention here. We are aware that there are many. Unfortunately space constraints have severely limited the depth and breadth of this paper. A few key experiences have emerged from the South African experience that are worth sharing.

6.1. Fit-for-purpose government monitoring information systems

First is the importance of fit-for-purpose government monitoring information systems for research. Government MIS systems are critical for decision making and policy review and are important for policy makers, policy researchers and academics as they provide the basic 'facts and figures' on the skills development system. In the absence of key MIS systems, much of the research undertaken in South Africa's skills development system would not have been possible. There is, however, a caveat. MIS systems should be simple and clearly targeted to the goal. Attempts to establish complex systems, such as was attempted in the initial establishment of South Africa's Further Education and Training Management and Information System (FETMIS) delayed the ability to achieve a working FETMIS for many years.

6.2. Establish as a clear government target the development and maintenance of local research centres for skills development research

Second is the importance of establishing as a clear government target the development and maintenance of local research centres for skills development research. As this paper shows, researchers in skills development do not have an easy home in South Africa or in Africa. Unlike many of our American, Australian or European counterparts, African universities have dedicated much of their towards schooling and higher education and towards the training of teachers. A home for researchers in skills development needs to be created by developing and maintaining, as a clear government target, a coherent research community in established research centres which has the ability to regenerate itself through training young researchers into Masters and PhD programmes.

The history of skills development research in South Africa highlights the importance of this. Currently, only a small research centre, the Further Education and Training Institute (FETI), exists at the University of Western Cape and another, Research into Education and the Labour Market Programme (REAL) at the Education Policy Unit, University of Witwatersrand and both research centres are in a continuous struggle for funding for continued survival. A small amount of research is undertaken at the HSRC and by the JET. These are mainly small scale research projects and insufficient to produce an effective knowledge base for the sector or to sustain a research community. The importance of developing and maintaining a competent research community cannot be stressed enough and so too the importance of developing an independent research community that has the space to challenge, critique and conceptualise new ways of dreaming.

6.3.   Fund theoretical studies

Third is the importance of theoretical studies. This quick journey through the skills development research undertaken post 1994 highlights the role that research has played in the construction, fine tuning and overall conception of South Africa's skills development system. This contribution lies not only in the empirical skills related to gathering and analysing data, but also in the capacity to debate, engage and challenge. And, importantly, within the context of international policy transfer, the development of a solid research community located within an institutional base provides the opportunity to engage with international (and rather dominant) 'discourses' in skills development and to challenge, alter and modify this discourse for the national context.

The very term skills development means different things in different context across and within countries. The skills development approaches adopted in one country – located within broader socio-economic development projects – cannot easily and certainly not neatly be transported to another and neither can the evaluation and research indicators and approaches be so transported. This is not to say that we can't learn from these countries, but it is to stress the importance of avoiding 'simple policy transportation' and developing local research expertise to support the development of alternative policies. An example cited in the paper is that of the debate regarding the High Skills and Low Skills Equilibrium debate where Kraak (2004, 2006) through engagement with this debate developed the notion of a 'multipronged skills strategy' for South Africa which aimed for a 'higher skills equilibrium'.

Linked to the above point, is the importance of providing funding for skills development research which moves beyond the project by project costs of research, but recognises the cost and importance of maintaining a research community that has the ability to specialise and stay on top of international and national debates.

6.4.   Develop structures and processes that ensure a working relationship between academics and policy makers

Last, but not least, is the importance of maintaining a structured dialogue between academics and policy makers. Researchers and policy makers live in different worlds and respond to different sets of pressures. Despite this, or perhaps because of this, policy makers and researchers should work together to interrogate the strengths, weaknesses and even the underpinning assumptions of systems and structures.

The relationship in South Africa of educational academics with the democratic State was (and to some extent still is) markedly different from the relationship which academics in some developing countries, for example in the United Kingdom. While the 'progressives' of South Africa struggled to 'reconstruct' a democratic society and worked in parallel with the State to achieve this, in the United Kingdom the battle lines between intellectual work and policy work were drawn (Young, 2008). The working relationship between academics and the state enabled rigorous debate and engagement around the development of South Africa's policy frameworks. The depth and degree of this engagement has shifted over time from being an intensely close working relationship in the *Period of Construction*, to a working relationship, but one with slightly greater distancing during the *Period of Critique* which was a period in policy was rapidly being implemented. It was hinted that policy

makers were concerned that too much engagement with academics would slow down the implementation phase. The period called *Deconstruction – A New Moment* saw a reopening of the debate and engagement. In retrospect, a clearer and systemically defined approach to the engagement between policy and research might have provided a more consistent engagement over time.

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