

Schools need to come to the skills party

EDUCATION IS AT THE HEART OF SA'S SKILLS CRISIS.

LAWRENCE WORDON



Fourteen years into our new democracy, South Africa's schooling system still does not produce sufficient numbers of learners with the requisite marks in Mathematics and Science to pursue careers in professions such as engineering, accounting, management or medicine.

While initiatives such as Dinaledi, have increased the number of learners passing Mathematics on the Standard Grade from 91,805 passes in 2001, to 149,222 in 2007, the pool of candidates with Mathematics on the Higher Grade remains small. Of the 25,415 learners who passed Higher Grade Mathematics in 2007, only 8,000 obtained a "C" symbol, the prerequisite for an entry-level engineering qualification.

Of grave concern is the fact that only around 3,000 of these learners are black. Limited numbers of black learners with mathematical skills continue to stymie efforts to fast track transformation within the professional band in South Africa.

The situation is unlikely to improve under the New National Senior Certificate, which will be awarded for

the first time in 2008. Although all candidates will now be required to study Mathematics or Mathematical Literacy, the pool of candidates with the requisite marks in Mathematics to enter many of the professions is unlikely to increase markedly.

Until the crisis in Mathematics and Science teaching is addressed fully, South Africa will continue to experience skills shortages in the professions. While the creation of the new rank of Master Teacher will hopefully encourage well-qualified Mathematics and Science teachers to remain in the teaching profession, (the profession is currently losing 18,000 teachers per annum), efforts should be made to lure highly qualified, experienced Mathematics and Science teachers, who left the profession in the 1990s, back into the profession. This is key to improving the number of learners with "excellent" and "meritorious" marks in Mathematics, who are able to meet the entry requirements for many of the professions.

There is no escaping the fact that South Africa is grappling with a serious skills shortage. According to the Department of Labour's National Master Scarce Skills list released in April 2008, South Africa is short of around one million skilled workers. Shortages include 420 CEOs and MDs, 13,525 GMs, 3,570 engineering managers and project managers and 6,675 ICT managers, 17,000 university and college lecturers and around 51,110 teachers.

It is important to recognise, however, that South Africa is not alone in this respect: there is currently a global skills shortage, with the skills of professionals, in particular, in high demand. Placed in perspective, while South Africa is grappling with

a shortage of 22,000 accountants, China reported shortages of 170,000 accountants in 2008. The global skills shortage is being fuelled by a number of factors including the fact that many baby boomers (born 1946 - 1964) are starting to retire. This is leaving a huge knowledge gap, worldwide. Shortages are also being fuelled by the insatiable appetite for infrastructure, buildings and electricity, worldwide. These initiatives require sizeable numbers of skilled, experienced professionals.

Skilled professionals are very mobile, and South African professionals are in high demand worldwide. Many highly skilled, experienced South African professionals are working in Europe, the UK and the US. They are undoubtedly already feeling the impact of retrenchments in these countries, wrought by the global financial crisis. Some may even consider returning to South Africa.

There are also many South Africans working on contract in Africa, UAE, Dubai, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi. Some of their contracts may also be coming to an end. There is an opportunity to bring these individuals back to South Africa. Employers need to recognise, however, that because professionals work in a global market, they will expect to be paid global rates.

Whether South African professionals are "lured" back to South Africa, or whether skills are imported, appointments at a professional level should always include skills transfer. Shadowing, mentoring and coaching should form an important component of any professional's job description. Skills transfer is key to creating a pipeline of experienced, talented young professionals in South Africa.

(HRf)