

Political history matters for artisanal skills planning

Summary

The re-establishment of a good artisan training system has been identified as a key research focus area and urgent priority given that “the apprenticeship system has been allowed to deteriorate since the mid-1980s, resulting in a shortage of mid-level skills in the engineering and construction fields” (DHET 2013). However, over the last three decades, there have been extensive political and economic changes, meaning that any planning activities and interventions aimed at improving the production and retention of artisanal skills have to be sensitive to such change. In addition, our country has a complex history of technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and work characterised by gender, race and language inequalities. Clearly, a better understanding of the contextual issues that affect the extent, nature and location of the demand and supply of artisanal skills can positively impact skills planning and intervention. Critical questions to direct such an endeavour would thus be: How have historical patterns shaped the nature of artisanal training and employment today? How can planning for artisanal skills be responsive to the changing nature of work and the division of labour in the workplace? How can planning be responsive to innovation and change?

In order to better understand such a complex and multi-layered context, and the questions emerging from it, three research projects were undertaken under the Labour Market Intelligence Partnership (LMIP) to investigate (1) the economic and political history of artisanal work and training (Mbatha et al. 2015), (2) changes to the nature of artisanal work and its organisation (Wildschut & Meyer 2016), and (3) changing intermediate level knowledge bases and their relation to artisanal preparation (Gamble 2015). This policy brief focuses on one of the findings of the political history project (a mainly negative discourse on artisanal skilling and employment in the country) and highlights implications for policy.

Introduction

In the post-apartheid era, expanded skills development has been recognised as a key element of the government’s efforts to address socioeconomic transformation as well as secure South Africa’s continued industrial and human development. Since 2009, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) has prioritised the development of a credible institutional mechanism for skills planning to inform the policy intervention and incentives needed to promote skills development.

Alter the negative discourse to re-image TVET and artisanal work

Recommendation 1: The DHET should strengthen and continue their policy efforts to positively re-image the work of artisans and TVET.

Recommendation 2: Firms should more strongly signal the demand for artisans and TVET qualifications. This will contribute to building the status and confidence in the importance of artisanal skills. The broader society will then have a clearer sense that it will be financially rewarding to invest in these skills.

Recommendation 3: Strengthening career guidance capacity at schools is critical. It would be important at this level to more consistently communicate the value of TVET qualifications. It would also be useful to signal trades currently in demand. This information could be replicated on different career guidance platforms, such as the DHET's careers portal.

Recommendation 4: TVET policy should address the interests and lived experiences of society more directly (particularly the youth) to highlight that in addition to formal employment, such training can be used to create livelihoods and address other societal needs.

Artisan training has come under the spotlight in this context to address a major gap in the labour market at the intermediate skills level. Over the past two decades, the debate has centred around the validity of the system and how it can be reformed in a democratic inclusive South Africa amid widespread claims of artisanal skills shortages acting as a binding constraint on economic growth. A great deal of effort has gone into attempts to estimate the demand for artisanal skills and to assess the capacity of the supply-side institutions to meet this demand.

Such labour market information is necessary but insufficient to inform successful planning and interventions. Simple, static and mechanistic demand–supply calculations do not reflect the complex set of economic, political and social dynamics shaping artisanal skills development. In this policy brief, we aim to address this gap. We focus on an evaluation of the twentieth-century history of artisanal training in South Africa against the backdrop of the production environment in which the training was provided and the broad economic and political events and policies. The discussion is divided into the pre-democratic and democratic eras demarcated by the year 1994, which was when the country politically transitioned from a racially exclusive system to a democratic one. This exploration

illustrates how the training system reacted and reinforced the challenges of technical and vocational skills production in both eras. The research essentially concludes that dealing with artisan skills production and the associated challenges for employment creation requires an institutional understanding of artisan history and the prevailing economic parameters that provide both constraints and opportunities for policy making.

Study finding: Negative discourse on the vocational education and training system

Artisanal development in the pre-democratic era was shaped by aspects of the colonial period, through the mineral revolution at the turn of the nineteenth century, the period of industrialisation after World War II and the formalisation of apartheid, and finally during the period of reform initiated in the 1980s.

Tracing the origins of artisanal training back to the arrival of European settlers in the 1600s, the review highlights its colonial roots as well as its linkage to the system of slavery. Two historical facts emerge as important. First, that after 1652, Dutch traders and early settlers imported slaves from various parts of Africa and Asia (Wedekind 2013) to provide the artisanal labour required to grow farms and towns. Second, in 1775,

the concept of apprenticeship was first introduced as an integral part of the system of slavery, allowing slave owners to “apprentice” the children of male slaves and free Khoisan or Hottentot women until adulthood. While this was abolished in the 1790s, the practice was subsequently reinstated with respect to free “coloured” children of a certain age with certain conditions.

Wedekind (2013: 39) contends that in the early 1800s, with the abolition of slavery, a system was instituted which allowed slaves to be indentured as apprentices to their owners for a fixed period. With the shortage of labour, this system came to involve the coercion of African children into a form of apprenticeship referred to as *inboekseling*.¹ While this was recognised as an apprenticeship system, the range of tasks for which an apprentice was trained included household and farm work, hunting and herding, maintenance and repair of machinery and fire-arms, various aspects of construction work and providing music in the case of skilled musicians.

1 “Despite the fact that slavery was outlawed, as a condition for independence from Britain, the systematic raiding of African homesteads to capture African children and youth as slaves continues, as slavery had become an entrenched part of the Boer economies. The captives are called *inboekselingen*” (SA History 2011).

These early characteristics shine light on the extent to which inequality and racial discourses are embedded in artisanal skilling, with a distinctive feature being that "...right from its earliest incarnation, apprenticeship in South Africa was a coercive and exploitative relationship, rather than a benign relationship between a master craftsman and a novice" (Wedekind 2013: 40).

Other early forms of apprenticeship are evident in the period from the early 1800s to the 1900s, with the mineral revolution and World War I being key points with implications for the relationship between the labour market and skills and particularly the nature of artisanal skills. There are also sector-specific developments during this period which impacted the understanding of TVET in the South African context. Historical documents illustrate how sectors like mining and manufacturing – bolstered by a large base of cheap black labour – grew out of attempts to meet the needs of investors, white labour, government agencies and various international players. While agriculture played a big role, the mining sector formed the foundation for most of the growth of TVET, demanding particular skills sourced through migration and local training.

In particular, the two colour bars set by the Chamber of Mines had significant implications. Not only did these play a major role in driving industrialisation and securing the profitability of the industry, but they locked Africans into unskilled, low-paid employment. The wage colour bar set a ceiling on the wage for African labour and the job colour bar prohibited the employment of Africans in skilled and supervisory labour. The colour bars were supported by the Mines and Works Act of 1911 which bolstered their effects by restricting certification of competency to white and Coloured workers only for a number of skilled mining occupations.

Over time, however, the colour bars became increasingly unprofitable. Mine owners began to de-skill jobs (also referred to as job fragmentation), giving increasingly more work to black miners, to save labour costs. Despite the provisions of the Status Quo Agreement with the Chamber of Mines in 1918,² mine owners continued their attempts to replace a number of white workers with lower-paid black workers, resulting in the 1922 white workers' strike (Webster 1994). To appease white mine workers, the government implemented two key pieces of legislation, further racialising apprenticeship and technical training: the Juvenile Affairs Act of 1921 and the Apprenticeship Act 26 of 1922. These Acts structured mechanisms for white youth employment and crafted apprenticeship entry requirements to be well out of reach of the majority of youth of other races (Wedekind 2013). Once the Pact government came into power in 1924, it intensified discrimination against black workers through new legal means, including the Civilised Labour Policy of 1924 (Callinicos 1980) and the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1924 "which secured [for whites] a virtual monopoly of highly paid skilled jobs" (Webster 1994: 91). The most striking feature of the Act was the exclusion of black workers from the definition of employee. Furthermore, the Minimum Wages Act of 1925 extended the job reservation policy and secured white employment by specifying certain trades reserved for white people.

Economically, pressures pointed towards the inefficiency of the racialised labour market, but the legislative framework continued to be driven by political objectives seeking to disempower black people in the workplace and protect white workers. An effect of the looming World War II was loss of skilled labour from mining and other sectors to the

military service. A related development was the introduction of the National Technical Education system in 1935, in conjunction with the creation of technical colleges organised under the Central Organisation of Technical Training (COTT) to cope with the growing demand for skilled labour (NTB/HSRC 1985). COTT was created primarily to deal with the demand for skills in munitions, civilian defence work and the armed forces at the outbreak of World War II, but contributed to the institutionalisation of a training system that had the co-operation of both firms and government at the centre (NTB/HSRC 1985). In this period, the state focused on introducing more formal vocational training structures in order to address the "poor white" problem, equipping poor white people with skills to help them secure employment and to secure their support as a class. The effects of these efforts on technical training are apparent in the rapid rise in the number of white workers undergoing artisanal training during that period. The heightened efforts at technical training in preparation for and during World War II were sustained beyond 1945, when the war ended.

The 1950s proved to be a decade in which the social, political and economic exclusion of black people by the apartheid government became even more deeply entrenched through a series of legislated segregationist efforts. With the National Party's ascent to power in 1948, many racially exclusive policies were passed into law, starting with the Group Areas Act 41 of 1950 and the Bantu Building Workers Act 27 of 1951. These Acts formally ensured the exclusion of black labour from technical training along spatial lines. To further legitimise the status quo in education and the workplace, Acts such as the Bantu Education Act 47 of 1953, the Job Reservation Act and the Colour Bar Act of 1954 maintained white hegemony and black subservience by

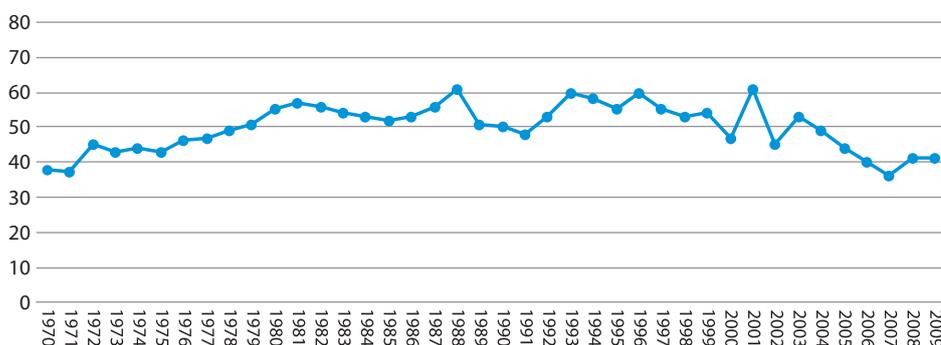
² This agreement maintained the scope of employment of white workers relative to employees of colour (Johnstone 1994).

Table 1: Percentage distribution of apprentices by sector and race group, 1969–1979

Sector	Coloured (%)	African (%)	Asian (%)	White (%)
Building	55	35	45	9
Metal & engineering	11	7	13	40
Furniture	11			
Motor	9	28	10	20
Electrical		14	17	18
Other	14	16	15	13
Total	100	100	100	100
Average per annum	6 700	560	1 380	37 600

Source: Lundell & Kimmie (2002)

Figure 1: Historical pass rates of artisans at the INDLELA testing centre (1970–2009)



Source: Van Rensburg et al. (2012)

giving preference to white workers and prohibiting certification for acquired skills for any “non-white” person.

Over the next period, the intense interplay between different labour market sectors and their related skill demands on political responses and pressures are again illustrated. The establishment of the harbours and railway systems required appropriate technical skills. The rapid industrialisation process and the agricultural and manufacturing sectors expanded their shares of the economy. These shifts led to increasing mechanisation and, in turn, a rise in the demand for skilled artisanal labour and the intensification of the adoption of a migrant labour system for Africans.

The 1970s saw the beginning of *de facto* desegregation in the workplace, facilitated to a large extent through the

recommendations of the Riekert (1977) and Wiehahn (1979) Commissions. Nevertheless, white people continued to be the vast majority of apprentices and the dominance of black people in lower status trades was clearly apparent (see Table 1). While the majority of white apprentices were in the metal and engineering sector, the largest proportions of other race groups were found in the building sector: 55% Coloured, 35% African and 45% Asian apprentices. In this way, the nature of artisanal training, status and certification became racially determined.

The late 1900s was characterised by intertwined economic and socio-political developments, culminating in the significant reform of the artisanal skilling system through the Manpower Training Act of 1981. This opened up opportunities for black people to receive skills training and enter into

apprenticeships, although still within a separatist and racialised socio-political structure. Nevertheless, change was slow³ and the total number of artisans began to decline in 1991. Thus, although the provisions of the Manpower Training Act started to counter the exclusion of black trainees from the apprenticeship system and artisanal employment, the negative effects of the economic decline of the 1980s and privatisation of the training system had a significant impact on the capacity for technical skills supply. Figure 1 illustrates that even though the trade test pass rates recovered somewhat after 1992, from 2000 there has been a general downward trend indicative of the crippling conditions in the whole TVET system.

The analysis on artisanal development before 1994 illustrates key historical features of the creation and evolution of the apprenticeship system and the artisanal labour market, and gives insight into the origins of the contemporary negative discourse on TVET. These features relate to its exploitative history and links to slavery, its use as a social engineering tool, its association with a limited set of trades and technical occupations, and its low status in comparison to professional work and qualifications (Wedekind 2013). The review illustrates not only how artisanal skilling became closely associated with racial restrictions and conflict, but also explains the strong political efforts and impetus towards radical labour market and training system change. Analysis of the economy after 1994 also highlights important considerations for future intervention and policy making on artisan development.

3 Although there was growth in the number of black artisans trained in the sector (especially starting from 1981), in absolute and relative terms this was insignificant.

Policy implications: Considerations for the national development of artisans

This policy brief outlines some of the findings generated by a research project reviewing the evolution history of artisanal training in South Africa in the context of the production environment in which training was provided, shaped by economic and political changes and the related shift in labour market and training policies (Mbatha et al. 2015). The review showed how, in the pre-democratic period, the development of the artisan training system was characterised by different forms of inequality along racial, geographic and sectoral lines. These manifest as ongoing challenges for the current regime of training policies in a democratic system, the primary aim of which is to improve labour market access and opportunities while at the same time growing the economy.

The outline of major historical developments provides some understanding of why our skilling and labour market systems reflect specific racial, sectoral and skills-level characteristics. While causalities and the chronology of key events will surely be contested in any historical account, this discussion highlights that the history of artisanal development in the country is deeply embedded in the needs of the labour market, political imperatives and societal pressures of particular points in time. Furthermore, it is clear that the interplay between various parts of these systems at different points in the historical trajectory has had profound implications for the success or failure of political, social and economic objectives. All these trends should make us think more strategically about what we can achieve in attempting to grow the economy to provide decent artisanal employment and skills and to recruit and retain artisans.

The message for policy is clear: the future success of an artisanal system in the country depends on acknowledging and confronting the complexity and power of the historical processes and associated discourses underlying the training system and its related employment in the country over time. The question is: How can policy makers do so?

Altering societal discourse is not an easy task. It relies on a range of interlocking factors coming together successfully and this cannot easily, or with certainty, be planned for or predicted. However, policy does play an important role in precipitating and even driving such change. Indeed, there have been a range of policy initiatives in the country, spearheaded by the DHET, with the aim of addressing various aspects of this negative discourse. A few examples are: (1) instituting learnerships; (2) identifying 125 occupations as designated trades for which an artisanal qualification is required; (3) establishing a system for capturing the number of qualified artisans; (4) creating a list of retired artisans who can function as mentors; (5) declaring the “Decade of the artisan”, which include roadshows and awareness initiatives across the country; and (6) a growing policy focus on improving the quality of and expanding access to TVET. Together, such policy interventions aim to address the shortcomings and negative perceptions associated with the concept of apprenticeship, TVET and artisanal work in the South African context.

Drawing from the analysis in this policy brief, we thus support and recommend further strengthening of the current policy emphasis on TVET as a means to alter the negative discourse on artisanal work and training. Of course, such policy emphasis need to be accompanied by evidence of real, positive change in the TVET subsystem as well as artisanal workplaces so that TVET qualifications

become attractive and have parity of esteem in society. Critical prerequisites are improved throughput rates and more effective communication of the value of TVET and occupational qualifications, and ensuring quality training in firms. Improved career guidance at basic education level (pre-Grade 9) can also play a positive role.

We build on the above recommendations by drawing on the insights from related research (Gamble 2015, Wildschut & Meyer 2016) and argue that in order for this re-imagining process to be successful, our recommendations on policy have to go even further. Policy change has to go beyond the traditional emphasis on the role of TVET to ensuring employability in the workplace – which can be seen as largely reflecting the interest of capital and not addressing the interests or lived experience of the majority of individuals, particularly the youth (Powell 2012) in our society. If the lived experiences of our society (the majority who are unemployed and have low levels of formal education) are not better addressed in TVET policy, this will continue to have negative implications for the discourse on artisanal training and work.

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